

Chillin' in Another World

WITH LV 2

SUPER CHEAT POWERS



7



Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri





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Characters

Chillin' in Another World with Level 2
Super Cheat Powers



Flio

Former Hero Candidate and
General Store Proprietor.



Rys

Flio's wife, a lupine demon.



Sybe (Psychobear Form)

Flio's pet.



Elinàsze

Flio and Rys's daughter.
A real daddy's girl.



Garyl

Flio and Rys's son.



Salina

Garyl's classmate. Seems to
have feelings for him...?



Irystiel

Garyl's classmate and
Beliana's younger sister.



Wyne (Human Form)

Freeloader with high stats
and a big appetite.



Tanyalite

A maid who showed up uninvited
(Servant of the Celestial Plane).



Hiya

The Djinn who Commands the
Origin of Light and Darkness.



Damalynas

The Grand Magus of Midnight.
In training in Hiya's mindscape.



Sleip (Human Form)

Former member of the
Infernal Four.



Byleri

Former archer of Klyrode
living in sin with Sleip.



Rislei

Sleip and Byleri's daughter.



Greanyl

Shadow demon working for
the Fli-o'-Rys General Store.

Characters

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Ghozal

Once known as the mightiest
Dark One in history.



Uliminas

Ghozal's former confederate in
the Dark Army and current wife.



Balirossa

A former knight of Klyrode
and wife of Ghozal.



Folmina

Ghozal and Uliminas's
daughter.



Hero Gold-Hair

On the run from the law
despite being the "hero."



Tsuya

Hero Gold-Hair's
partner in crime.



Valentine

A beguiling djinn and one of
the Twelve Evil Generals.



Dawkson (Yuigarde)

Ghozal's younger brother and
short-tempered Dark One.



Calsi'im

The hardworking Dark Regent.



Tia

Calsi'im's minion,
a magic doll.



Belianna

A foul-mouthed devil who
loves her little sister.



Phufun

Yuigarde's minion, a succubus,
and an extreme masochist.



The Shadow King

The former King of Klyrode,
and head of the Shadow
Conglomerate.



Ellie (The Maiden Queen)

Hardworking queen with a
strong sense of justice.



Belano

A quiet, shy, and
skittish teacher.



Blossom

A former knight of Klyrode.
Works hard on the farm.

Super Cheat Powers

Chapter 1: Blessings and Disasters

The world of Klyrode is a world of swords and sorcery, of magic beasts and demihumans, in which humans and demons had waged war since time immemorial. But the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, the greatest of the human kingdoms, and Dark Regent Calsi'im of the Dark Army brokered a peace treaty between their forces, and the land has been at peace for several months.

Many demons were driven away from the Dark Army by the Dark One Yuigarde's violent despotism. Now, Calsi'im is making earnest entreaties for them to rejoin the Dark Army and work together for a better future. The Maiden Queen, meanwhile, has focused her attention on her kingdom's domestic affairs, repairing roads and fortifying her cities' defenses so that the people of Klyrode can live in peace. Her dedication has earned her the lasting approval of the populace.

And so, the stage is set. The curtains open...

◇A Road, East of Houghtow City◇

Flio and Rys drove their wagon along a road in the forest far to the east of Houghtow City. Flio had once been a merchant from another world, but then he was summoned to the world of Klyrode as a Hero candidate by the former king. He received a powerful blessing when he arrived in this world, granting him mastery of every spell and skill to exist within it. Now, he managed the Fli-o'-Rys General Store and raised his children with his wife, Rys, a lupine demon who was a former soldier of the Dark Army. Upon being defeated by Flio, she'd chosen to walk alongside him as his wife. She adored her husband to a somewhat excessive degree, and together they had a pair of twins—Garyl and Elinàsze.

"It's been some time since you and I made a delivery alone like this, my lord husband." Rys smiled happily, looking up from her perch in the driver's seat at Flio sitting beside her. Her wolf tail, which she usually kept hidden when she

was in human form, was wagging from side to side.

Flio gave her one of his usual easygoing smiles. “Thanks to Tanya helping out at home and Minilio disguising himself as me at the store, we have enough time to make deliveries ourselves if we like now. I haven’t been east of Houghtow City much, you know. I thought it would be a good idea to travel out this way so if we ever need to go again, I can use Teleportation.”

The spell Teleportation enabled the caster to conjure a portal leading to a place they had visited previously, enabling them to travel instantaneously.

“Your magic is incredible, my lord husband,” said Rys, a look of envy crossing her face. “You can travel to places it would take months to reach on even the fastest of horses.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t go that far,” said Flio, smiling wryly. “I’m sure anyone in the Klyrode Magic Corps or one of the Dark Army’s spellcasters could do what I do easily.”

Quite some time had passed since Flio had been summoned to this world as a Hero candidate, but he still underestimated his own magical ability. In his previous world, he’d had barely any magical ability at all. So he was still working under the preconceived notion that any spells *he* could cast must be typical fare for spellcasters of this world.

Rys widened her eyes in shock at her husband’s words. He seemed to lack any awareness of the absurdity of what he had said. “N-Not at all, my lord husband! There are very few magic users in the world who can cast Teleportation in any capacity! There were only a handful during my time in the Dark Army who could cast it, and I’ve heard that there aren’t many more in the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Moreover, it takes a tremendous amount of magic power to teleport the sorts of distances you do! Usually, it would take a mage several days to make such a trip, and they’d need to rest in between casts.”

Sybe, who was pulling the wagon, nodded its head in agreement as if it could understand Rys’s words. Sybe was a massive, wild psychobear who had randomly encountered Flio in the Delaveza Forest. Sensing that it had no hope of victory, Sybe had surrendered on the spot and went on to live with Flio as his household pet. Sybe spent most of its time transformed by a spell of Flio’s into

the body of a unicorn rabbit. But now, it was in its original form in order to pull the wagon.

Flio looked between his wife and his psychobear pet, his easygoing smile back on his face. “Thank you for saying so, you two. It makes me really happy to hear.” But even as he said so, he thought to himself, *Those two are just flattering me a bit, that’s all.* “Anyway,” he continued, “I haven’t been this way before. There’s quite a number of magic beasts around here, aren’t there?”

“There do seem to be. Greanyl said that her teams drove off every magic beast they encountered when they were out this direction. It’s peculiar...” She inclined her head, puzzled. The area around the wagon was full of giant magic beasts drawing closer. Rys was tracking their presence with her senses, while Flio knew their positions thanks to his Search spell.

Thirty-two in total... Flio thought, looking over a window displaying the results of his spell. *That’s quite a number of them.*

They were all displayed in red, the color indicating a creature with hostile intentions. Ordinarily, a wagon under attack by so many magic beasts would have no choice but to flee, even if they happened to have a force of mercenaries protecting them. The creatures kept advancing. They could sense Sybe—a magic beast in its own right—but they themselves were much larger and more ferocious beasts. They paid Sybe no mind.

When Sybe had lived in the wild, it would perhaps have run away. But now, it pulled the wagon onwards, completely unconcerned despite the warnings its senses were giving.

Rys sighed. “I can’t believe they’re attacking our wagon, of all things. This is precisely why everyone hates wild magic beasts. They have no ability to sense the true strength of their opponent.” Looking around the area, she slowly took to her feet. She stripped off the clothes she was wearing until she was stark naked. Flio couldn’t help staring at his wife’s beautiful body as she leapt off the driver’s platform and transformed into a great white wolf.

Lupine demons, like Rys, were among the strongest species of demons to exist in the world. Rys kept her power hidden in her daily life—she tended to stay disguised as a demihuman, after all. But here, she could show off her true

nature, her power on full display.

“Awooooooooooooo!” Rys let out a howl and the magic beasts surrounding the wagon immediately began to back off. She darted off into the forest to investigate.

Flio watched as the red dots in the Search spell window decreased in number. Wherever the blue dot indicating Rys went, the red dots would vanish instantly. It wasn’t that the enemies were slow to react—no, they would sense Rys in her lupine form, and their wild instincts would tell them they had no hope of victory. They were in a full retreat. In fact, they had been retreating since Rys had let out that howl. But even so, Rys pursued them at shocking speed until there were none left.

“Rys really is something else...” Flio watched Rys’s blue dot dart around the window, erasing red dots all over the map. Sybe came up behind Flio and looked over his shoulder.

“Gwor?” said Sybe.

“Ah, of course,” Flio replied. “We can’t just leave magic beast carcasses lying around or they could spread disease. Sybe, would you mind picking them up for me?” He handed Sybe a Bottomless Bag, which the psychobear manipulated dexterously with its big paws, tying it around its left arm.

“Gwor!” it said when the bag was firmly in place. Flio gave Sybe an approving nod, and it, too, ran off into the forest.

Sybe came upon a dead magic beast that had fallen relatively close to the wagon. It reached out, and the beast’s carcass was absorbed into the Bottomless Bag. Sybe sniffed proudly before continuing, following Rys’s trail deeper into the forest to clean up the magic beasts she’d left in her wake.

Flio smiled as he watched Sybe work. *I could have just used magic to clean up the carcasses*, he thought. *But then Sybe told me it wanted to help out if it could. It sure is a hard worker!* He returned to the Search spell window he had been looking over earlier. There were only a few red dots left. Rys’s blue dot, ever persistent, was in hot pursuit.

Just then, Flio felt something new arrive—something disconcerting. He looked

up and noticed a dark cloud rising in the clear blue sky. It literally seemed to be welling up out of the ground. “Huh?” he said, curiously cocking his head. “That looks like the dimensional rift...”

Flio zoomed out the display on the window and went to inspect the site of the dark cloud swelling into the sky. “I’m not sure *what* that is,” he said, “but it looks like something pretty big is forming...”

In the Search spell window, a much larger red dot blinked ominously.

◇Meanwhile, Inside the Dimensional Rift◇

The Median Plane was an expanse of space, with a world known as the Celestial Plane at its heart. The world of Klyrode was only one of many planetoid worlds that existed inside the Median Plane. The planetoids moved around, sometimes drawing closer together or farther apart. Celestials called the space between worlds the “dimensional rift.”

The Celestial Plane had many disciples with the power to move through the dimensional rift. Right now, they were in a state of great consternation.

“Where could the Beast of Disaster have escaped to...?”

The head of the disciples was a woman whose body was half that of a young girl and half fleshless skeleton, and she wore a ragged cloak. She shouldered her scythe and hissed in frustration. “The Beast of Disaster... Capable of wielding magic powerful enough to destroy a world. To think it would escape again after we had finally cornered it. As your commander, this is my failure. We must locate it at once and seal it within the Prison World Ghuma.” She began casting Search, but then...

N-No... Cold sweat came to the commander’s brow. There are too many worlds in this part of the Median Plane! I can’t tell which reaction is coming from the Beast! There are too many entities that could be it...

The other disciples were casting Search as well, looking as hard as they could for a sign of their enemy. But their commander had them beat when it came to magic. If she couldn’t locate the Beast of Disaster, there was no chance that they were going to be able to. Clearly, this was going to take some time.

We need to stop the Beast of Disaster before it enters another world! It is sure

to spell ruin for any world it comes to...

◇A Road, East of Houghtow City◇

Flio looked up at a corner of the blue sky where a black cloud was rising up out of the dimensional rift. “Jeez,” he said, glancing between the Search window and the cloud itself. “That’s quite the reaction. I’ve never seen anything like it before. What in the world...?” A smaller window appeared beside the large, blinking red dot, labeling the hostile presence as the Calamity Wyrn, Beast of Disaster. “Beast of Disaster?” Flio repeated. “Calamity Wyrn? I’ve never heard of anything like it.”

Just then, another small window appeared next to the thing’s name.

Threat level: extreme. Extermination recommended.

“Extermination, huh?” Flio said, looking up. “I dunno...” He could see a golden dragon begin to materialize inside the dark cloud. Its enormous maw was followed by an even more enormous body, long and vast. Lightning flashed about its wicked fangs and claws. Its roar echoed throughout the forest. “That’s a pretty big dragon,” Flio said. “Now, how to go about exterminating it...”

As Flio gave the matter some thought, another window appeared before him.

Recommendation: *Celestial Spell, Twilight of the Gods.*

“Oh, that’s right!” Flio said. “I learned how to use Celestial Magic the other day! I could cast one of those spells! But ‘Twilight of the Gods’? That’s quite a name, isn’t it? It looks like it takes a lot of magic power to cast too...”

As he ruminated, the Calamity Wyrn began to unleash bolts of lightning on the surrounding forest. They struck the ground with deadly force, exploding and lighting fires everywhere. And it was only a matter of time before the dragon itself descended upon the land.

“I see...” Flio said. “We wouldn’t want to let that magic beast destroy any more of the forest, would we? I suppose I had better hurry up and exterminate

it.” He nodded to himself and held up his hands, facing the Calamity Wurm.

Flio chanted an incantation, and an immense magic circle appeared, slowly revolving. Another, even greater magic circle appeared, only to be followed by a third, and then a fourth and fifth. It was a truly stupendous array. The dragon noticed the magic circles forming and stopped in its tracks. It had been diving for the ground, but upon seeing Flio casting his spell, it changed directions. Bellowing, it charged straight for Flio at the center of the magic circles.

The circles grew larger and larger. Before long, they were bigger than the Calamity Wurm itself. They continued expanding as if to envelop the dragon. The dragon’s head passed inside the circles and they stopped, not moving an inch.

Flio watched, continuing the incantation. Finally, he finished. He closed his outstretched palms into fists. “Twilight of the Gods!”

The magic circles, big enough to contain the dragon’s entire body, shone with a golden light. Then, the color deepened to the red of the evening sky. The circles began to shrink, and with them, the Calamity Wurm helplessly grew smaller and smaller until it was no larger than a gem. It descended slowly from the sky.

“My lord husband!” Rys came running up. She had been hurrying through the forest as fast as she could. Now part human and part wolf, she was still naked, but was covered in fur and had a tail, wolf ears, and vicious fangs.

“Good to see you, Rys!” said Flio. “Did you finish cleaning up the magic beasts?”

“I-I did,” she said. “All of them are taken care of. B-But...my lord husband, that enormous creature that appeared from the hole in the sky... It had such vast magic power. Do you suppose that was one of the Beasts of Disaster? A creature with enough strength to destroy worlds...?” She looked up, and her eyes shot open wide. “H-How strange!” she said. “I’m sure I saw the dimensional rift in the sky just moments ago. And I thought I saw something that looked like a Beast of Disaster come out of it...”

She still looked astonished as she went to put on her clothes and fully change into her human form. Rys and Sybe searched the skies, wide-eyed and blinking,

but the dimensional rift and the dark cloud both had vanished without a trace.

Flio smiled wryly at the two of them. “Oh, the Beast of Disaster?” he said. “Would that be this?” He held up the gem for Sybe and Rys to see.

“M-My lord husband...” Rys looked no less astonished at the gem than she had at the sky. “Is that a magic circle in the form of a solid gem? I-I’ve never seen such a thing. I had no idea it was even possible!” She looked over the solidified magic circle until she noticed what was inside it. “O-Oh! My lord husband! This thing inside the magic circle... Could that possibly be the Beast of Disaster that appeared from the rift? It...It can’t be, can it...?” Her voice quivered with fear as she looked up at Flio.

“Yes, that’s right,” Flio said, wearing the same easygoing smile as always. “I guess I was able to capture it with one of my spells!”



Flio's words made Rys and Sybe freeze up entirely. "Th-Then..." Rys said. "You were able to capture a Beast of Destruction, a monster capable of ending the world, with one of your spells...?"

"Gwowf..." added Sybe.

The two began to tremble, glancing between Flio and the gem in his hand.

"Surely you're exaggerating," said Flio, smiling bashfully. "If someone like me can cast that spell, I bet it would be easy for a professional mage. And it cost me a solid eighty percent of my magic..."

Incidentally, Flio was at a much higher level now than he had been back when he had used the spell Purify in the Delaveza forest upon first coming to this world. His magic power had grown by tens of thousands of times since then, far more than what his status screen could display. All of his stats were simply listed as ∞ , meaning that they were too high to be calculated. Flio, however, didn't know what the symbol meant, and set his status screen not to display. He had no idea how high his level was. He also had an impressive array of defensive, sensory, and security magics active at all times. One of them was the spell Concealment, which prevented others from sensing his magic power. It was impossible to tell from looking at him just how powerful he was.

As Flio spoke, a magic circle appeared in the sky behind him, and Hiya and Damalynas appeared. Hiya, the djinn who commanded the origin of light and darkness, was a being who wielded magic powerful enough to destroy the world, but after they were defeated by Flio, they took to calling him "Exalted One" and moved into his house. Damalynas was known as the Grand Magus of Midnight—the master of the dark arts. But she had been defeated by Hiya, and now, she lived in Hiya's mindscape where she served as their companion and "training" partner.

Flio turned around to see the pair floating in the sky. "What's up, you two?" he asked.

"E-Exalted One..." Hiya began. "We came because we sensed an uncommon malevolent magic entity in this area..."

“We came as quickly as we could...” said Damalynas. The two looked around, clearly baffled.

“How peculiar...” said Hiya. “I was sure that I sensed something.”

“I don’t see anything that fits the bill, though...” said Damalynas.

“Oh,” said Flio, holding out the solid magic circle in his hand. “Is this what you’re looking for, by any chance?”

Hiya and Damalynas looked on in shock. Even Hiya, whose eyes looked like nothing more than thin straight lines most of the time, opened theirs just slightly. For them, that was equivalent to the wide-eyed expressions Rys and Sybe were making. “Is this... Could this possibly be the legendary spell Temporal Seal? No, that doesn’t seem right. This must be of a higher level than even that...”

“I’ve mastered all of the black arts, and I’ve never *heard* of a spell that could seal away a monster like that...” said Damalynas. “What on earth *is* this guy...?”

Flio watched on, pursing up his lips. *Those two are real experts on magic... I must have done something wrong if it has them so stumped...*

“Exalted One!” said Hiya.

“Lord Flio!” said Damalynas.

“Y-Yes?!” Flio exclaimed, startled by their mutual address.

“Exalted One, what manner of magic is this? I beg of you, if I may be so bold, please teach your lowly servant your secrets!”

“I want to learn too, Lord Flio!” added Damalynas. “This is fascinating!”

The two pressed in close. Flio instinctively took a step back, smiling stiffly. “I don’t think it’s anything too special,” he said. “But I believe it was called Twilight of the Gods...”

“What?!” Hiya and Damalynas exclaimed together, going stiff with shock themselves.

“U-Um... Hiya? Damalynas?” Flio waved his hand in front of their faces, but the two didn’t respond at all, utterly frozen.

“Excuse me, my lord husband...?” Rys gently took Flio by the arm. “I’m terribly sorry to interrupt you, but we need to do something about the fire...”

Flio turned his gaze towards the forest to see plumes of black smoke rising here and there, where the Calamity Wyrms’ lightning had struck. “We do, don’t we...?” he said. “First, I’ll do something about the flames.”

He held out his arm and opened up a window displaying a list of spells. Then, he opened dozens more, each full of lists of spells to look over. Even the greatest magic users in the world of Klyrode were unable to call up more than one window at a time. But Flio was a master of four different worlds’ magic systems: the world of Klyrode, the Realm of Evil, the Celestial Plane, and Damalynas’s black arts, which had originated in yet another world. Conjuring dozens of windows at once was a feat only he could do.

Flio picked out a number of spells from the voluminous list. “I know!” he said. “This sounds like just the thing for putting out a fire.” He touched one of the spells, and an enormous magic circle appeared in the sky.

Hiya looked up, their eyes open as wide as they could. “It’s...huge...!” Damalynas stared up at the sky beside them, not believing her eyes.

“You never cease to amaze, my lord husband...” said Rys, astonished. “Such a vast magic circle...”

“Gwor! Gwor!” Sybe bobbed its head up and down in agreement.

Before their eyes, mist began to descend over the forest. Wherever the mist touched, the fire vanished. What had been threatening to become a raging forest fire was gone in a second.

“I-Incredible!” said Rys. “The fire’s gone!”

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile. “That spell’s called Requiem Mist,” he said. “In this case, I just thought a magically enhanced mist might be useful for putting out fires. It seems like it went okay!” He moved on to the next fire, and the next, using his Search spell to see what areas of the forest were in danger, and extinguished them with mist too.

Hm...? Flio thought. It looks like there are some demons fighting the fire to the north of here. Most of the fire’s out already. Maybe I could leave the rest of the

fire to them...? Still, he prepared to cast another spell.

“The spell the Exalted One is casting, Requiem Mist...” Hiya mused. “If my memory is correct, that is one of the innermost secret arts of the Grand Magus of Midnight, is it not?”

Damalynas’s face twitched, but she nodded. “Yeah... That’s right, Your Divinity. Even among those of us who’ve mastered the dark arts, there are only a couple who can cast it. It should neutralize all fire magic cast within its area...”

“Can you cast that spell, Damalynas?”

“I *can*...” Damalynas said, swallowing hard. “But if I did, I’d give myself instant magic depletion...”

Damalynas was the Grand Magus of Midnight, master of the dark arts. The spell Flio was casting over and over again was one that might cost her her life if she tried to cast it. But Flio looked like he could do it all day.

“Truly, he is the Exalted One, I suppose...” said Hiya.

“It feels presumptuous to call myself the Grand Magus of Midnight around him, honestly...” said Damalynas.

The two shared a look and nodded.



“Well, we got the fire under control,” said Flio. “Should we head home for today? This isn’t a particularly urgent delivery.”

“That sounds wise.” Rys nodded. “It’s almost time for Elinàsze and Garyl to come home from school.”

Flio held out his hand. Without an incantation, he summoned a magic circle. In it appeared a portal. Teleportation was one of Flio’s most frequently used spells; he had gotten to the point that he could pull it off wordlessly.

When the Magical Kingdom’s elite spellcasters from the Magic Corps cast Teleportation, it took a number of them chanting for some time to manage the spell. Hiya and Damalynas, as well as the former Dark One Ghozal, were all capable of using it on their own, but all of them needed to use an incantation, unlike Flio.

Flio opened the regular-looking door as Damalynas watched on with a supremely dry smile. “Incantation-less, huh?”

“Indeed,” said Hiya. “He is, after all, the Exalted One.” Nothing would startle them any longer after what they had seen. They headed through Flio’s portal completely unfazed.

On the other side of the door was the front entryway of Flio’s house. Once everyone was through, Flio followed himself. The door vanished after him, like it had never been there.

◇Meanwhile...◇

Just after Flio’s portal vanished, a number of figures appeared in the sky and fell to the earth. Their bodies were half those of young women and half-skeletal, and they wore ragged cloaks. They approached the spot where the portal had been and began to look around.

“Strange,” one said. “We followed the Calamity Wurm’s trail, but there’s no sign of the thing...”

“Indeed...” agreed another. “We even found where it had created a dimensional rift to force itself into this world...”

These were the disciples of the Celestial Plane who had been transporting the Calamity Wurm when it escaped. They had tracked the Beast and arrived here.

“It really is peculiar. I can sense the Calamity Wurm’s magic lingering in the sky...”

“Yes, it’s as if its magic power was suddenly reduced before completely vanishing...”

As they spoke, some angels began casting Search while others flew around the skies, searching the area. Suddenly, their captain seemed to realize something.

“A sudden reduction in magic power...” she muttered quietly to herself. “Could it be...someone imprisoned it using the spell Twilight of the Gods...?” She shook her head. “N-No, that’s impossible. Twilight of the Gods might be the only spell that could seal away a Beast of Disaster, but it is one of the greatest

mysteries of Celestial Magic. Only a very few of the gods can cast it. It's preposterous to think that one of them would have been on an ordinary planetoid world like this one..."

The captain gave up on that line of reasoning and turned her attention back to searching the forest. But the Calamity Wyrms were already far away. Flio had taken it with him to Houghtow City, imprisoned in the magic circle gem created by Twilight of the Gods.

◇Houghtow City—In Front of Flio's House◇

Flio and the others emerged from the portal in front of their house to see Elinàsze running up, a big smile on her face from the moment she caught sight of her father.

"Welcome home, papa!" she said. Elinàsze was the older of Flio and Rys's twins. Thanks to her mother's demon blood, she and her brother had been aging at an alarming pace. She was a serious girl who loved her father very, very much. She was also very fond of her adopted older sister, Wyne.

Flio hugged Elinàsze tight and patted her on the head. "I'm home," he said. "Were you a good girl while I was gone?"

"Yes, papa, of course! I've been helping Miss Byleri since I arrived home from school!"

"Helping Byleri..." Flio repeated. "You've been looking after the horses?"

"I have! Miss Byleri has been feeling sick. I tried to cure her with magic, but it didn't seem to work very well..." Her expression darkened, the difficulty casting the healing spell having upset her somewhat. "She's resting in her room now. I'm helping out by doing her chores."

Behind Elinàsze, Flio could see Wyne and Garyl leading the horses back into the stable for the night. Wyne was a dragonewt, the race said to be the strongest warriors among dragonkind. She had once collapsed mid-flight, only to be rescued by Flio and Rys. She went on to become part of their family. She loved being the big sister to Elinàsze and Garyl, and would often adoringly dote on them. Garyl was Elinàsze's twin brother, the younger of the two. Like his sister, he had accelerated growth from his demonic heritage and was very fond

of his big sister Wyne.

“Oh! Dad! Welcome home!” Garyl exclaimed, giving his father a big grin. All of the horses in Byleri and Sleip’s pasture were magic beasts. They were very hard to handle, but Garyl was riding one comfortably.

Wyne, though, was a different story. “Bleh!” she cried, crossing her arms in a pout. She was dressed in a baggy poncho-like outfit. “They won’t listen to me!”

Most of the horses she was trying to corral were still young foals. It seemed less like they were willfully disobeying Wyne and more like they thought she wanted to play. Wyne would run up only for them to disperse, circle around her, and rub their muzzles against her cheeks or nibble at her clothing.

Wyne honestly seemed to be mostly playing as well. She had a big smile on her face as she chased the horses around.

Just then, Sleip stepped out from the stables. “Don’t make too much trouble for Wyne, now, you hear?”

Sleip was a former member of the Infernal Four. He had quit the Dark Army and now resided at Flio’s house, where he helped look after the horse-type magic beasts in the pasture. He was getting up there in years, but he had still ended up in an intimate relationship with the much younger Byleri. Things seemed to be going well between the two of them. In practical terms, they were essentially married.

Wyne beamed brightly back at Sleip. “Don’t worry, don’t worry! You handle the other horses, Sleis-Sleis! I’ll take care of these!”

“Hah. All right. I’ll leave them in your hands, then.”

“Yay! Thank you, thank you!” Wyne grinned and bobbed her head before she took off after the foals. She jumped, making a great leap to a corner of the pasture where several horses were milling about. As she did, the baggy hem of her outfit floated up around her arms, revealing her bare skin underneath.

“Big sis Wyne!” Elinàsze exclaimed, her face turning red. “How many times —?! ”

Wyne wasn’t wearing her underwear. She wasn’t wearing anything at all

underneath her poncho, in fact. With her poncho fluttering up in the air, her whole naked body was on full display.

Flio made a dry smirk. “Well, dragonewt bodies retain a lot of heat. She gets overheated sometimes...”

“I’m sorry if I’ve made trouble for your children, Mister Flio,” said Sleip.

“No, no,” Flio reassured him. “They look like they’re having fun, and it’s good for them to help out. Besides, the horses here are an important part of Fli-o’-Rys.”

The horses in the pasture included a company of Sleip’s handpicked elite demon horses, who had been his subordinates during his time as an Infernal, as well as the wild magic beasts they had caught. All of them pulled wagons for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store supply team. On top of that, they sometimes lent their wagons out to other companies for heavy work. Recently, they had been facing a veritable deluge of requests, so it was no surprise that the value of the horses was fresh in Flio’s mind.

The supply team itself had once been part of the Dark Army as well. They had been known as the Silent Listeners, the intelligence arm of the Dark Army led by Uliminas, a confederate of the Dark One. The supply team was led by Uliminas’s former subordinate, the shadow demon Greanyl.

Sleip nodded cheerfully in agreement with Flio’s words. “Mister Flio. We had nowhere to go when we were driven from the Dark Army, but you welcomed us into your house and treated us kindly. Not only that, but you gave us meaningful work. We are truly grateful to you, Mister Flio.”

“I’m very glad to hear that,” Flio said. “But may I ask...” He cocked his head, slightly puzzled. “Elinàsze told me Byleri isn’t feeling well. Is she all right? Elinàsze said her healing magic wouldn’t work...” *Elinàsze is still young, but her healing magic is pretty good...* Flio had been teaching Elinàsze how to use magic whenever the two of them had a moment of spare time. He knew her abilities better than anyone—well enough to know that the story sounded strange.

“Oh,” said Sleip. “Well, she does seem a bit better now, thanks to Elinàsze’s magic. But I really do wonder what could be the problem...” He lowered his head and folded his arms in thought.

“Maybe I should take a look, then?” Flio offered.

Sleip nodded. “I’m sorry to trouble you with this, but thank you for your help.”

Before Flio could get moving, Ghozal came out of the house and up to Flio. “Oh, Mister Flio! You’re home!”

Ghozal was, in actuality, the former Dark One Gholl. He had abdicated his throne in favor of his younger brother Yuigarde and disguised himself as a human to freeload at Flio’s house. He and Flio were something along the lines of best friends. Since moving in, he had taken two wives: Uliminas, his former confederate from the Dark Army, and Balirossa, who had once been a knight of Klyrode and a skilled swordfighter.

Flio gave Ghozal one of his usual easygoing smiles. “Yes, I teleported back just a moment ago.”

“I guess it was nothing after all, judging by how you’re acting,” Ghozal said. “We sensed an enormous magic beast in the direction you were headed, you know...” Ghozal had been in the Fli-o’-Rys General Store when the Calamity Wyrms spawned. Houghtow City was quite some distance away, but Ghozal could sense it easily. After all, he was the former Dark One and a powerful magic user in his own right.

“Yes,” Flio confirmed. “We managed to get it under control.”

“I see. That’s Mister Flio for you, I guess! I wanted to run out there and help you, but Uliminas and Balirossa have been under the weather...”

“Uliminas and Balirossa have also been unwell?” asked Flio.

“Curious...” said Sleip. “My Byleri has been sick as well...”

“Hrm... Byleri too?” said Ghozal. “Then all three of them got sick at the same time...”

Ghozal and Sleip shared a look and lowered their heads in thought. Flio held up his finger, getting their attention. “In any event, it doesn’t seem like it’s contagious. Maybe letting them rest would be the best thing to do.” He had been using a spell to check the area around the house for a contagious disease.

It was a high-level spell with a complicated incantation, and he had cast it without uttering a single syllable. Ghozal and Sleip, however, knew all too well how absurd Flio was. They didn't doubt his words for a second, nor did they seem at all surprised.

"I see..." Hiya said, observing Sleip and Ghozal carry on a normal conversation despite Flio's incantation-less Detect Disease spell. "Perhaps theirs is the correct reaction to the deeds of the Exalted One."

"Yeah..." Damalynas agreed. "I kinda feel like it might be..."

◇Flio's Living Room—That Night◇

That night, all of the house's residents gathered together for dinner in the living room, as they typically did.

Blossom was laughing merrily as she dug into a great hunk of meat. She had once been a heavy knight in service to Castle Klyrode, but she had quit the knighthood along with her best friend Balirossa and they had come to live together at Flio's house. She came from a farming family and was quite good in the fields. In the time she had lived here, she had turned a large plot of land next to Flio's house into a sprawling farm.

"So I was helping out at the store today," Blossom said. "Y'know, Tanya is somethin' else..."

"I believe I did no more than would be expected of Master Flio's maid," Tanya said, her expression blank. She was standing in the back, dressed in her maid uniform, while the rest of the house was gathered around the large table.

Tanya's full name was Tanyalite. She was, in fact, a disciple angel from the Celestial Plane sent to keep an eye on Flio due to his outrageous magic power. But a freak collision with Wyne had robbed her of her memory, and now, she really believed herself to be the maid of the household.

"Hey, there's no need to be modest!" said Blossom. "I cut my farmwork short and came running 'cause I heard Uliminas and Balirossa got sick and had to leave early. But when I got there, I found Tanya running the store by herself! It was like she was everywhere at once! Tanya, Tanya, Tanya, wherever I looked! It was a bit of a shock, y'know."

“I did nothing special,” Tanya said, her blank expression not changing in the slightest. “I simply used light speed movement to maneuver around the customers as I needed.”

Garyl’s eyes lit up at Tanya’s words. “Whoa! You can move *that* fast?”

“Yes, Young Master Garyl. I believe that no less should be expected of the maid of this house. I simply did as I must.”

“Huh. I wish I could move that fast...” Garyl said wistfully.

“Then,” Tanya ventured, “forgive my boldness, but perhaps, when we both have the time, I can teach you to move as I do?”

“Wh— Really?!” Garyl exclaimed, his face bursting into a grin. “Yeah! Let’s do it!”

“Garyl...” Elinàsze scolded him, glancing over at her brother. “Aren’t you busy studying swordsmanship with Uncle Ghozal? You *do* have trouble with magic. Perhaps it would be better to spend your time studying your spells?”

“Y-Yeah, I guess so...” said Garyl. “Fine... But I just like moving my body better!”

Elinàsze sprang from her seat, placing her hands on her hips as she carried on her lecture. “Listen to yourself! You’re trying to avoid it! I know it’s not moving your body, but you should spend some time learning magic from papa and Hiya with me!”

“All right, all right! Next time, I’ll join in on your magic practice...”

“You say that now, but I can tell you’re planning on running away from practice again tomorrow! You need to study properly, even if it isn’t your strong suit. Skipping lessons is bad!”

Garyl could only stammer and stutter before Elinàsze’s assault. Wyne wrapped her arms protectively around her brother, still chewing on a mouthful of meat as she patted him on the head. “Stop it, Eli-Eli! Gare-Gare’s a good boy! He works really, really hard!”

“I know Garyl works hard, big sis Wyne,” Elinàsze responded. “But recently, he’s been so preoccupied with sports and running around! He hasn’t had much

time to practice his magic. And that's why..."

Elinàsze continued arguing in that vein. She seemed so grown-up that all Wyne and Garyl could do was hold each other tight and grimace as she lectured on.

Flio smiled as he looked over at his children. *Elinàsze's grown up to be such a serious girl! She must get that from Rys. And Garyl likes to do whatever he feels like, but he always gives it his all. And Wyne takes such good care of both of them...*

Flio glanced over the handful of empty chairs around the table. Usually, for dinner, every chair was full. "Are Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri not having dinner with us?" he asked.

Ghozal shook his head. "Hrm," he said. "They're asleep in my room. They've been out since they got back from the store. Healing magic makes them feel better, but only for a bit. I'm at a bit of a loss myself..."

"I see..." said Flio, folding his arms in thought. "So it wasn't just Elinàsze. You couldn't cure them either?"

"Indeed..." said Sleip, who was sitting next to Ghozal at the dinner table. He looked troubled. "Byleri's been putting a brave face on, but it seems to be bothering her as well. I think she doesn't want to worry me..."

"Perhaps I should have a look myself after dinner," Flio offered.

Rys, still wearing her apron, stepped up beside him. "May I accompany you, my lord husband?" Rys had once been in the Dark Army as well. She was well acquainted with Ghozal and Sleip, and considered Uliminas a friend. She wanted to be there to give them her support.

◇Later—Ghozal's Bedroom◇

Ghozal's room was large—big enough for himself and his two wives. The bed, too, was big enough for all three to sleep on together. It was the biggest bed in the whole house—the perfect place for Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri to rest.

"Lord Flio..." said Balirossa. "I must apologize for causing you worry..."
Balirossa was a former knight of Klyrode Castle. Now, she lived at Flio's house

and worked in the Fli-o'-Rys General Store. She was one of Ghozal's two wives.

Uliminas and Byleri blinked awake and sat up. It seemed like Balirossa's words had awoken them.

"You too, Uliminas?" asked Rys, stepping up to the bed with a worried look on her face. "What could be the matter? You haven't taken a day off since you first became the Dark One Gholl's assistant."

"Mrow..." Uliminas said. "I've never been this sick before in my whole life. I can't believe I've let mew see me like this. I'm so humewliated!" She smiled back at Rys, but it was clear she was faking it. Her eyes looked miserable.

Uliminas was a hellcat and had been both Ghozal's aide and confederate back when he was the Dark One. When he'd given up the throne, she left the Dark Army alongside him and now worked at the Fli-o'-Rys General Store disguised as a demihuman. She was Ghozal's other wife.

"Like, same..." moaned Byleri. "When I was a knight, never getting sick was, like, the only thing I had going for me..." Her smile didn't seem any less forced than Uliminas's.

Byleri had been an archer in Balirossa's knightly company. She, too, had quit and now lived at Flio's house. She put her considerable equine expertise to use looking after the horses in the pasture and spent her time with her lover, Sleip, to whom she was practically married.

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Byleri," said Sleip. "We all have days like this." He had accompanied Flio and Rys to check on the girls. After all, he was in a hurry to return to Byleri's side. Sleip considered himself very fortunate to have found such a loving partner at his age and treasured Byleri a great deal. Her illness had him worried all day—a far stretch from the fearsome aura of the oldest and most dangerous member of the Infernal Four.

Ghozal folded his arms and nodded. "That goes for you two as well," he said, turning to Uliminas and Balirossa. "Don't push yourselves. I'll take care of everything at the store."

Uliminas, who had been devoted to Ghozal since back when he was the Dark One, and Balirossa, whose beauty had captivated him from the moment he set

eyes on her, were Ghozal's wives, whom he loved from the very bottom of his heart. In demon society, it was legal for a man to take as many as three wives, but Ghozal was fond of saying that he was more than satisfied with just the two.

Ghozal was trying to act his usual nonchalant self, but with his precious wives sick in bed, he could hardly disguise his worry. His forehead was wet with nervous sweat.

Flio took a look at Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri and began to cast a spell. *They really don't seem to be sick with a disease, but something has them all feeling under the weather.* He lowered his head in thought. *What could this be? I feel like I've seen something like this before...*

Flio had a curious inkling in the corner of his mind. Then, his eyes fell on a basket resting on the bedside table. Inside was a great pile of yellow fruit. It seemed the girls had been eating them—a pile of peels had accumulated in the basket. “Have you been eating these?”

“Ah, yes...” said Balirossa. “Somehow, it's the only thing that seems appetizing right now.”

“I know it's purrculiar,” added Uliminas. “But I suddenly wanted to eat 'em.”

“Like, I know, right?” said Byleri. “Normally, they're, like, way too sour. But somehow, they taste good now.”

Rys stepped up to the basket and took one of the fruits in her hand. “My, are these lembons? That takes me back! I asked my lord husband to buy a lot of these because I had anticipated craving them...”

“Yeah!” said Uliminas. “Mew bought way too many lembons back then! Mew baked a lot of 'em into cakes to sell at the store, but there's still a ton in the magic box in the kitchen. We've been purrusing them a bit.”

Flio's eyes shot open. “Wait just a second! That time when you were buying all those lembons... Didn't you suddenly feel sick around that time yourself?”

“Yes, I suppose I did! I believe it was when— Oh!” Rys's eyes opened in recognition.

“Wh-What is it, Mister Flio?!” asked Ghozal.

“Did you figure something out?!” demanded Sleip.

The two leaned in, eager to know what was wrong with their wives. The women on the bed, too, turned to look at Flio in surprise.

Flio held out his hand and pointed it at the three girls—specifically, their bellies.

“My lord husband...” Rys said, her eyes sparkling. She thought she had an idea what Flio was thinking. “Could it be...?”

Flio nodded. “Exactly. We’ve been thinking they were sick, but I had forgotten about how fast part-demons develop. The possibility completely slipped my mind. But there’s no mistake.” Flio breathed a sigh of relief, a happy smile returning to his face. “Congratulations! All three of you are pregnant! I believe you’re suffering from morning sickness.”

“No way!” said Ghozal.

“Can it be?!” said Sleip.

“P-Pregnant?!” repeated Balirossa.

“Mreow!” exclaimed Uliminas.

“Like, oh my gosh?!” said Byleri.

“Hrm!” Ghozal beamed and gave his two wives a great big hug. “We did it, Balirossa! Uliminas!” He no longer looked anything like the strongest Dark One in history—rather, simply a proud human father.

“Sir Ghozal...” Balirossa gasped. “T-To think that I would bear such a highborn child...”

“I-I guess with all the lovemaking we had going on, it was only a meowtter of time...” said Uliminas.

Next to them, Sleip had pressed up close to Byleri. “I can hardly believe it! A child, at my age...”

“Tee hee hee!” Byleri giggled. “Lord Sleip... I’m so happy...”

Everyone embraced, sharing their joy. Flio and Rys watched on, smiling at the

happy scene. “I suppose if they were pregnant, it makes sense that Elinàsze and Ghozal weren’t able to cure them.”

“Yes, I suppose it does,” said Rys. “But what a blessing...” She pressed up close to him, closing her eyes. “My lord husband, no matter how large our household grows, I, Rys, your wife, will do my utmost to support everyone.”

Lupine demons had a strong pack-forming instinct. It was their way for the pack’s leader to direct the group and for the others to assist them. To her, the people living at Flio’s house were like her pack. And as the leader’s wife, she saw it as her duty to see to everyone’s needs.

“You don’t have to do everything on your own, Rys,” said Flio. “Remember, I’m here to help you.”

“My lord husband... Thank you so much...” Rys smiled fondly. Then, she blushed a soft pink and leaned in to whisper in Flio’s ear, “But you know, with all these new children in the house, Wyne and Elinàsze and Garyl might want some more younger brothers and sisters... I wouldn’t mind having another pair of twins...”

“O-Oh!” said Flio, taken a bit off guard. “I-I see!”

◇Some Days Later—Castle Klyrode Throne Room◇

The Maiden Queen stood up from her throne, her face pale. “Th-Then we have yet to obtain any reliable information?!”

The Maiden Queen’s father had been a selfish and wicked king. When his evildoings had come to light, he had been forced to flee the country, and his daughter took the throne. She was a hard worker with a strong sense of justice who cared deeply for her people. She was a good queen, beloved the land over. She had a very anxious disposition, though, and with the stress of work, she had been suffering from terrible stomachaches.

Knight Captain MacTaulo stepped forward. “Your Majesty, the Magic Corps elite are doing everything they can. Please be patient for a while longer while they search.”

“Y-Yes, you’re right. I must apologize. That was quite unbecoming.” MacTaulo’s words seemed to return the Queen to herself. She sat back down

on her throne. “But if the reports of a magic beast with terrific power appearing within our borders are true, we must act quickly.”

“All companies are ready to move on a moment’s notice,” MacTaulo reassured her.

The Maiden Queen nodded, but the color did not return to her face. *We received the report from our soldiers charged with monitoring the fluctuations of magic energy within our borders, she thought. If it’s a magic beast from this world, I have every confidence that MacTaulo and his knights will be enough to defeat it. But if my worst fears are true, a harbinger of chaos has come to our world—a Beast of Disaster...* She swallowed. *We’re finally rid of my father and his wickedness. We’ve been setting the kingdom in order. We’ve even signed a peace treaty and ended the ancient war with the Dark Army! The land is at peace! So why are there still more problems every day?!*

She felt a sharp pain in her stomach and pressed her hand against it. Clenching her teeth, the Maiden Queen shook her head. “No. I mustn’t waste time on self-pity! The survival of the Magical Kingdom rests on my shoulders!”

She bit her lip, steeling her resolve. *Yes... she thought. I suppose I have no choice but to ask Lord Flio for his assistance once again. If only he would accept the post of Hero and lead our armies, that would be a tremendous help. But thanks to my father’s foolishness, we lost the opportunity. It is truly a pity to have lost such an extraordinary man...*

Under her father, the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode had begun summoning people from other worlds to try to find a worthy Hero. Anyone summoned from another world was granted a blessing from the gods. They would name ones with particularly strong blessings “Hero” and give them whatever assistance they could, hoping for someone who could vanquish the Dark One. But Flio seemed to have had no blessing whatsoever when he first appeared. He was labeled a failure and sent away.

When Flio reached Level 2, however, his true blessing activated, and he proved to be powerful indeed. And although he had refused any official recognition, he had helped take care of all sorts of trouble in the past. As far as the Maiden Queen was concerned, Flio had the makings of a true Hero. But the

kingdom had named another man Hero already and were incapable of giving the title to Flio. According to the laws of the Magical Kingdom, once a Hero was officially named, they would remain Hero until their death or their departure from the world. Only then could a new Hero be selected.

As the Maiden Queen mulled over her thoughts, a man from the Magic Corps burst into the throne room. “Your Majesty! I have news!”

The Queen rose to her feet again, her face once again pale white. The man’s behavior had her worried. “Y-Yes! What is it?”

“It’s the magic beast we sensed, Your Majesty—the one with unimaginable magic power. We’ve completed our magic wavelength analysis. There’s only one match... The legendary Beasts of Calamity.”

Everything seemed to go white. *I-I knew it!* the Queen thought. *It is said that when one last visited our world, it slaughtered all in its path until the disciples of the Celestial Plane appeared to contain it...* “W-We must act at once!” she said. “Oh, how terrible...”

“Y-Yes, well,” the mage began. “We are almost certain that the beast in question was a Beast of Calamity. But it doesn’t make any sense. It had hardly appeared when it vanished, nor did it leave a trace!”

“Excuse me...?” The Maiden Queen was shocked.

“It *vanished*?” asked MacTaulo. “What do you mean?”

The man looked extremely confused himself. “W-Well, we’re still trying to learn what exactly happened,” he said. “It seems that an enormous magic beast appeared and immediately vanished.”

“I can’t believe it...” the Queen said, frozen still and staring in shock. “A Beast of Disaster, powerful enough to destroy the entire world...vanished in an instant? What could this possibly mean?”

The Beast of Disaster which had threatened Klyrode had already been dispatched by Flio, of course, but the Klyrode Magic Corps did not know that.

“I-In any event,” said MacTaulo, breaking the Maiden Queen out of her stupor, “I suppose the danger has passed...?”

The Maiden Queen nodded. “Y-Yes. So it seems. But we also cannot discount the possibility that it is merely lying in wait. Dispatch teams to the area where the beast was detected and see if they can find any other signs of it.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” MacTaulo knelt and bowed his head. The atmosphere in the throne room was a strange mixture of relief and tension.

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Behind Flio’s house stood a two-story building—the workshop he used to develop new merchandise. Flio invented the items, and the magic doll Flio had made, Minilio, produced them at volume.

That night, Flio came to the workshop with the gem he had sealed the Calamity Wyrm in. He folded his arms and gave it a long look. “With as much magic power as this thing has, I’m sure I can use it for some kind of new item...” he said. He poked and prodded the gem with his index finger, the dragon still sealed inside. Everywhere he touched, a new window appeared.

Calamity Wyrm Scale: Used in the manufacture of protective gear. Confers heat resistance, regeneration... (etc.)

Calamity Wyrm Horn: Used in the manufacture of magical catalysts. Reduces magic expenditure and confers lightning elemental... (etc.)

Flio looked over the windows until one in particular caught his eye. “Hm? What’s this...?” He took the gem in both hands. “Okay! How about that one? Rather than a weapon, I’d much rather make something that will improve people’s lives.”

A magic circle appeared and slowly began to revolve. “Using that beast’s parts as components for crafting looks like it takes a lot of magic too,” he said. “Oh well, it’s nothing I can’t manage.”

Flio got to work. It took an amount of magic power that the entire Klyrode Magic Corps elite would struggle to produce, but Flio went on, blissfully

unaware of the absurdity of the forces he was manipulating.

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair◇

Hero Gold-Hair and his companions were making their way up north. As they walked, Tsuya turned to Hero Gold-Hair with a worried look on her face. “Um... Is everything okaaay, Hero Gooold-Hair? That was a reeeally big sneeze!”

“Y-Yeah! Don’t mind me; I’m fine,” Hero Gold-Hair said, coughing into the back of his hand. *It feels like someone out there is talking about me...* he thought. *Worse, I think they might be saying I’m a failure who never should have been made Hero in the first place!*

Tsuya handed Hero Gold-Hair a handkerchief and he wiped his nose, grumbling to himself in irritation. *The blessing I got when I was summoned to this world raised my abilities to a pretty high level, but...* He called up his status window.

Level: 38

Strength: 999

Defense: 999

Speed: 999

Magic: 999

HP: 999

Skills: Dig

My level’s gone up a bit, but my stats haven’t increased at all since I was first summoned! I’m more than strong enough to handle human opponents, but plenty of demons and magic beasts have abilities in the thousands!

Hero Gold-Hair thought back to what had happened when he took the role of Hero and led the armies of Klyrode into battle. He had no ability as a commander, stumbling even when fighting weaker magic beasts. And as his allies fell around him, he had fled from the fight, shrieking, *“I’m not going to die in this dump!!!”*

I was a mess back then, wasn't I...? he thought. *But now, I have them...* He glanced back over his shoulders, where Valentine, formerly one of the Twelve Evil Generals, and her familiar, Riliangiu, were walking along behind him. *And Dawkson's a real tough guy. I'm pretty sure he used to be a big shot in the Dark Army. And she might not be with us right now, but there's Wuha G, the mansion djinn! I have all these outrageous folks putting their trust in me. We've become a real team. I'd sacrifice myself in a heartbeat for them!* He grinned, the picture of heroic confidence.

"Ummm..." Tsuya said, sidling up close beside Hero Gold-Hair and pressing her fingertips together. "Didn't you leave me ooout...?"

"H-Hm?! No! Never! What makes you say that?"

"I don't knooow..." Tsuya lamented. "Maybe I'm being stuuupid. But it felt like you left me ouuut of something..." She puffed out her cheeks in a pout, looking up at Hero Gold-Hair with jealous eyes.

A pang of stress crossed Hero Gold-Hair's face. *I-Incredible! Her intuition is as sharp as always! How can she tell what's going on in my head?!*

"We've knooown each for a long tiime!" she said. "I can tell what you're thinking juuust by looooking at you!"

"W-Well, quit it! You shouldn't read people's minds like that!"

Tsuya pouted and whined.

"Look at them," Valentine said, watching the two from a ways away with Dawkson and Riliangiu. "They know each other so well! I must say, I do envy her."

"You are every bit as alluring as Lady Tsuya, if not more so," said Riliangiu. "Alas, I believe she has already claimed the position of Hero Gold-Hair's sweetheart."

"Huh?" Dawkson asked. "'Swee tart'? What's that?"

"Oh, have you never heard the term?" Valentine asked. "It means she's so close to him that she can read his mind without any need for speech."

"Oh, really!" said Dawkson, nodding along. "I see!" *Y'know*, he thought, *back*

when I was the Dark One Yuigarde, my minion Phufun always knew what to do without me telling her... Although, now that I think about it, she got it wrong more often than not. She kept insisting that her intuition was never wrong, but she made mistakes all the time! And then I'd get all mad and send her flying...

He sighed, lost in memories of his previous life.

Valentine glanced over at Dawkson, her lips curved up in a flirtatious smirk. "Oooh?" she said. "Could it be that you have a sweetheart yourself? Dawkson, you sly fox."

"N-No!" Dawkson protested. "She's not like that at all!"

"She'?" echoed Valentine. "So there *is* someone!"

"G-Gh..." Dawkson's words caught in his throat as Valentine wrapped her arms around him in a sensual embrace.

"You may have a sweetheart, Dawkson, but *I* have needs as well," she said. "And my stomach is nearly empty, I'm afraid. Might I help myself to a taste of your magic? The usual way—through the lips."

"H-Hold on! You wanna do it *here*?!"

"Ah ha ha..." Valentine laughed, ignoring Dawkson's distress. "I'm sorry, what was that?"

"Nghh—" Dawkson objected, but Valentine cut him off with a kiss.

Valentine was originally from the Realm of Evil, a world in which the ambient magic in the atmosphere was much thicker than in Klyrode. In order to remain here, she had to continually absorb large amounts of magical energy. Until recently, she had been indulging in vast quantities of food, feasting on the minute amounts of magic contained within the matter. But now, she had come to a different arrangement with Dawkson.

"Tee hee!" Valentine giggled. "My, but taking it directly from you really is the easiest way to get magic. One kiss and I'm already just about full!"

"H-Hey! Be careful! I don't have infinite magic, you know!"

"Of course, of course," Valentine said, planting another kiss on Dawkson's lips.

“Mhrhf...” Dawkson mumbled, his lips pressed against hers and his magic flowing into her body.

Hero Gold-Hair watched the two with a bemused expression on his face. “You know, from the outside, it really does look like they’re kissing. Quite deeply too...”

“They aaare kissing, I think...” said Tsuya.

“Still, thanks to that little trick, we don’t need to pay for Valentine’s exorbitant appetite! It’s much lighter on our wallets. I hope they keep it up for many years to come.”

They watched as Valentine helped herself to a generous serving of Dawkson.

Chapter 2: The Former Dark One Becomes a Father

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

A teleportation portal appeared in front of the house. Flio stepped out, with Uliminas following after him. "Uliminas, I know you're worried about the store, but right now, you need to take care of your body. Please, go to your room and get some rest."

"M-Meowll right..." Uliminas said, wincing apologetically and scratching the back of her head. "Sorry to cause trouble when we've been so busy..."

It had been half a month since Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri discovered that they were pregnant. Everyone had been urging them not to push themselves too hard—to limit their exercise to walks and get plenty of rest. But Uliminas, who had been handling the store's accounting on her own, felt her responsibilities strongly. This wasn't the first time she had snuck out of the house to visit the Fli-o'-Rys General Store only to be escorted home by either Flio or Ghozal.

Flio smirked wryly. "You and Ghozal are both demons, so the pregnancy should be shorter than it is for humans, like it was for Rys. Honestly, the child could be born any day now. You're worrying everyone by sneaking out like this!"

"S-Sorry. I won't do it again." Uliminas bowed her head, mortified.

"Uliminas! Did you sneak out of the house *again*?!" Rys, who had noticed her husband returning home, strode angrily towards them, coming right up in front of the hellcat.

"I-I'm sorry! Really! I just felt purrturbed all of a sudden and thought I'd just take a little peek to see how things were going at the store..."

Uliminas got an earful from Rys about her behavior. All she could do was meekly bow her head before Rys's wrath.

Eventually, Rys finished her tirade and sighed kindly. "I really wish you would

stick to taking walks around the house like Balirossa and Byleri have. We're all just concerned for your well-being. Please, try to understand." She held Uliminas's cheeks in her hands, staring her directly in the eyes.

"I-I understand..." Uliminas said, drooping her shoulders and placing her own hands on top of Rys's.

Rys's expression softened into a smile. "Honestly... I was perfectly well-behaved when I was pregnant with my Elinàsze and Garyl. Why can't you be like me?"

"Excuse me?" Uliminas said, a look of disbelief crossing her face. Even Flio, who was standing next to her, smirked sardonically at his wife's claim.

"Squats..." Flio muttered beneath his breath. Rys turned her head to face him.

"Hunting..." Uliminas added. Rys's head turned in a different direction entirely, away from both of them.

Indeed, much to Flio's chagrin, when Rys herself had been pregnant, she had done squat workouts nonstop in her room, saying she couldn't let her body go soft. On top of that, she insisted on doing the food preparation herself, heading out time and time again to go hunting in the forest. Flio had had to retrieve her quite often.

"And you wouldn't stop cleaning the house or doing laundry..." said Flio.

"And mew went meowt shopping constantly..." added Uliminas.

The two went on listing Rys's own misdeeds when she had been pregnant. Rys clapped her hands over her ears and turned the other way. Flio and Uliminas looked at her and chuckled.

"Yeah..." Uliminas said. "Feels purretty bad to be scolded like that. I'll take care in the future."

"Thanks," said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile. "I appreciate it."

Rys kept facing away, her ears determinedly plugged.

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o'-Rys General Store◇

"Bring that product there, please," said Greanyl, the store's substitute

accountant, double-checking her paperwork as she directed the team. Greanyl had been a member of the Silent Listeners, an organization of shadow demons that had once served as the intelligence network of the Dark Army. She and the rest of the Silent Listeners had left the army, though, and now, they worked as the supply team for the Fli-o'-Rys General Store, with Greanyl at their head.

I've been doing okay as the leader of the supply team... she thought. *But with my Lady Uliminas—to whom I owe everything—pregnant and unable to work, I can hardly handle all of these responsibilities! I'm making Lady Uliminas worry; she's coming here multiple times a day to check in...* She pursed her lips, remembering Uliminas's most recent visit as she glanced around the store.

There were four people inside working—Ghozal, Tanya, Blossom, and Minilio, who was disguised as Flio. Flio had traded places with Minilio when he went to take Uliminas home. They had done it under the cover of the spell Concealment in order to avoid causing a scene.

Tanya was doing the bulk of the customer service, using her uncanny speed to deal with multiple people at once. But even she couldn't handle every customer in the shop.

Miss Tanya has been a huge help, but we just don't have enough staff... Greanyl thought. *Whenever Lord Ghozal tries to help customers, one look at that magnificent face of his knocks them flat on their backs! I had to ask him to stick to moving inventory...*

Greanyl respected Ghozal enough to leave the Dark Army herself when he had abdicated the throne. She was cold and analytic in her assessment of anything else, but when it came to the former Dark One, her estimation was abnormally high.

Miss Blossom's been very helpful, though, she thought. *We just need one more. Perhaps I should call someone from the wagon staging area for help...*

Greanyl stood up and turned in the direction of the door leading to the wagon staging area in the back of the shop, only to see a man already standing there. "Hey!" said Dalc Horst. "Lord Ghozal told me to come help. Sounds like you've got your hands full in here."

Dalc Horst was a demon horse and the former head of the Infernal Sleip's

handpicked company of elite soldiers. He had left the Dark Army along with Sleip and now lived in the stables outside Flio's house. Since he had led the company during their time in the Dark Army, it only made sense for him to take the leadership position in their new profession as draft horses for Fli-o'-Rys.

While pulling wagons, he took the form of a demon horse. But while dealing with customers, he assumed his human form. He had a handsome face and a slender, well-toned body under his half-open shirt. He was attracting a considerable number of stares from the younger women in the store, but he showed no signs of noticing as he stepped up to Greanyl.

"So, what do you want me to...*do*?!" Dalc Horst raised his voice in surprise. Greanyl was standing up, facing him, but her face was hidden behind a Wolf of Justice mask. "Um...Greanyl?"

"D-D-Don't mind me, please!" Greanyl said from beneath the mask. "Th-Th-This is just an...an advertisement campaign! Now, Dalc Horst, I'd like you to deal with the customers. Good luck!"

"O-Okay," said Dalc Horst, nodding. "I'll do my best!" He headed over to the shop floor.

Greanyl watched Dalc Horst get to work. Beneath the mask, her face was bright red. Not long ago, Greanyl had overheard Dalc Horst saying he had a crush on her. Ever since, she had been overly conscious of Dalc Horst, unable to look him in the face without turning bright red. She had hastily equipped the Wolf of Justice mask so as not to be found out.

Aaaaah!!! Greanyl thought. I hope he didn't see how red my face is! I-I need to calm down! This is unbecoming of a shadow demon of Lady Uliminas's Silent Listeners! How could I let this unsettle me so badly?!

"Um, Greanyl?" asked Dalc Horst, shocking her out of her thoughts.

"Eeeeeek!" Greanyl shrieked and jumped into the air, startling Dalc Horst almost as much as he had startled her.

"S-So, um..." he said when he recovered. "A customer wants five of these swords. Do we have more in storage?"

"A-Ah! I-I understand! I'll go check right away!" She hurried off towards the

storeroom, but with the mask blocking her field of view, she kept bumping into objects on the way, making strange vocalizations every time. “Ghah! Whrg! Kehh...”

Dalc Horst watched her go, plainly worried. *Greanyl’s been acting strange for a while now... he thought. I hope she hasn’t found out that I’ve been arranging things so I can pull her wagon. It feels like she’s been avoiding me...* Dalc Horst clutched his head in pain.

Blossom watched the pair’s little kerfuffle out of the corner of her eye as she helped a customer, smirking. *Those two are in love with each other, plain as day... Why don’t they just hook up already?*

As she had the thought, Tanya zoomed past on her way to help another customer. Without a doubt, the greatest problem for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store that day was its sheer popularity.

◇That Night—Flio and Rys’s Room◇

Flio and Rys’s room was on the second story of Flio’s house. Their three children, Wyne, Elinàsze, and Garyl, slept together in their own bedroom, leaving this room for two of them. It was partitioned into two parts—the bedroom, and their private chambers. At present, Flio was sitting at the desk in his chambers, looking over his sales ledger.

The Fli-o’-Rys General Store had three locations in total—the main branch in Houghtow City, a branch in front of the Dark Citadel, and a school store within the Houghtow College of Magic. At the end of the business day, each of the branches gave him a ledger enumerating both stock intake and sales.

Business has really been picking up at the Dark Citadel Branch... Flio thought as he looked the paperwork over. *Wolf of Justice merchandise is selling well as always, but other items have been selling more and more too...*

Rys came up beside him and set a cup of black tea down on his desk. “Shall we take a short break, my lord husband?”

“All right. Thank you, Rys,” Flio responded, giving Rys one of his typical kind smiles.

Rys smiled back at her husband. “You seem to be having fun.”

“Well, you know...” Flio smiled. “Before I came to this world, I was in charge of stocking inventory for a large conglomerate. Doing the books like this always reminds me of those days. I guess I’m just enjoying the memories.”

“You truly are a strange man, my lord husband,” Rys said. “You have the strength to conquer the entire world, but instead you would rather enjoy ‘doing the books’...”

“You give me too much credit, Rys,” said Flio. “My power isn’t that incredible. But even if I could, I wouldn’t want to rule the world. I would much rather use my power to create a world where everyone can live their lives with a smile on their face. For Wyne and Elinàsze and Garyl, and for Ghozal and Sleip’s new children.” He took a sip of tea, smiling happily.

“Yes,” said Rys. “You always do say so, my lord husband.”

“I suppose I do!” Flio pursed his lips apologetically. “But back then, I never thought about things like world peace or everyone’s happiness...”

“Back then?” Rys asked. “What do you mean?”

“Oh,” said Flio. “Before our first time meeting Hiya, I mean. When they...” He trailed off.

Hiya had been sealed beneath Castle Klyrode until they were one day set free and sent after Flio. Rys had blocked the attack with her body and ended up cut entirely in half. Flio saved her by reversing time, and then beat Hiya within an inch of their life with pure, overwhelming power. “I know I say I want peace for everyone,” Flio said, pulling his wife into a gentle embrace, “but the truth is, you’re the most important person in the world to me, Rys.”

“My lord husband...” Rys closed her eyes and rested her head against her husband’s chest. “It makes me happy beyond words to hear you say that.”

Rys gazed up at Flio. Flio gazed down. The two spent a while simply gazing into each other’s eyes. Then, they leaned in, pressing their lips together in a kiss.

Shortly, Flio was carrying Rys in his arms, princess-style. They entered the sleeping chambers and extinguished the magic lantern...

◇Midnight, Several Weeks Later—Flio's House◇

Flio lay in bed, resting his head against Rys's arm. Suddenly, his eyes shot open. He could feel a presence approaching. Careful not to disturb Rys, he slipped out of bed. But halfway through extracting himself from Rys's tight embrace, she woke up.

"Are they here again, my lord husband?" she asked, looking in the direction of the front entrance.

Flio stood up, smirking. "To them, the night is like daytime is to us. But why do they need to visit so many times at this hour...?"

"Shall I send them away?" Rys asked, getting out of bed herself and transforming her hands and feet into lupine claws.

"They're here to wish us good fortune," Flio said, still smirking as he put on his clothes. "I'd rather you didn't." Suddenly, Flio sensed something moving in the house at a high speed. *Hm?* "We need to hurry..." He held up his arm, conjuring a small magic circle. A second later, another magic circle appeared around Flio's body. He cast Accelerated Teleportation, a variant of Teleportation designed for short distances.

Meanwhile, Wyne was running through the hallway, making for the front entrance. "I sense something!" she called out. "Something weird!" She was partly in her dragonewt form—her tail was out—and she raised her arms to fight as she ran for the door.

"B-Big sis Wyne!" Elinàsze called. "Wait! At least put on your clothes first!" She was chasing after her sister through the air, using the spell Fly. She was dressed in her nightclothes and had a second pair of them in her arms for Wyne.

Dragons of all kinds had high body temperatures, and Wyne was no exception. Because of her physiology, she hated wearing clothing in human form. Even unconscious in bed with Elinàsze and Garyl, her aversion was so strong that she would frequently take off her clothes in her sleep. Tonight, again, she was running through the halls stark naked.

"B-Big sis Wyne!" Garyl cried after her, running out of the bedroom after her

and Elinàsze. In his hand, he grasped Wyne's discarded underwear. "Don't forget your panties! Your panties!" Thanks to his mother Rys's demon blood, Garyl had been growing up at an incredible rate. His face was turning red at the sight of Wyne's swishing tail. He kept turning his gaze to avoid getting a direct look at anything too private. *Big sis Wyne!* he thought. *I can't look at you if you won't at least wear your underwear!*

Wyne, however, could not be stopped. Flames spouted from the corners of her mouth as she ran. "Something weird is coming!" she said. "I'll protect everyone!" Her skin, which was already reddish, grew even redder. She was ready to unleash her fire breath.

"That's as far as you go, young mistress Wyne." Suddenly Tanya appeared from the darkness, catching Wyne by the scruff as she ran past.

"Mrrrf!" Wyne exclaimed, startled by the sudden stop.

"Eek!" shouted Elinàsze.

"Aaah!" shouted Garyl.

The twins had been chasing after Wyne at high speed. They couldn't stop themselves in time to prevent a collision! But...

"Are you two okay?" Flio, who had hurried over with his Accelerated Teleportation, grabbed Elinàsze in his right hand and Garyl in his left, preventing them from colliding with Wyne.

"Papa!" cried Elinàsze. "Thank you!" She beamed brightly and threw her arms around Flio's shoulders and nuzzled her cheeks against his, safe in the arms of her beloved father.

"Thanks, da...d?" Garyl began, but Elinàsze interrupted him with a telepathic message.

"Garyl, don't interfere."

Telepathy was a good method for conveying a message to someone privately. Ordinarily, there would be no way of knowing the contents of a telepathic communication, but Flio could understand thought waves transmitted by his daughter. Of course, he understood the contents as well. *That Elinàsze...* he

thought, smirking to himself as she rubbed her cheeks affectionately against his.

While Tanya and Elinàsze dressed Wyne, Flio went to open the door, meeting the elderly couple outside with his usual easygoing smile. “Would you happen to be guests for Mister Ghozal or Mister Sleip?” he asked.

The couple outside looked visibly relieved at Flio’s welcome. “Yes, that’s quite right. I must apologize for bothering you at this time of night. We vampires can only move freely after dark, you understand. I’m afraid we’ve caused you a great deal of trouble.”

“We stopped by for a visit, but everyone seemed to be asleep,” said the other vampire. “My husband and I were at quite a loss...” They bowed courteously to Flio.

“I’m terribly sorry,” the husband said, “but could you tell Lord Gholl, the Dark One— Oh, it is Lord Ghozal now, no?” he corrected himself. “Could you tell him that we have arrived?”

“We merely wish to offer him our blessings for the birth of his successor,” said the wife. The two bowed again.

Flio smiled at the couple. “I understand. Mister Ghozal asked me to let him know if he had guests arrive, whatever time of night. Although...I’m terribly sorry, but would you mind concealing your magic power just a little bit more? Your magic seems to have caused a bit of a stir in the house.”

By all appearances, the vampire couple looked like average elderly humans, but their magical power was so vast that it distorted the space around them, like a visible aura. It was obvious at a glance that the two were immensely powerful demons. They did seem to have cast the spell Concealment, but even so, they were leaking a considerable amount of magic—enough that Wyne had thought the house was under attack.

“Oh, my apologies!” the man exclaimed. “It has been quite some time since we have had cause to leave our domain.”

“We thought we had our magic concealed properly...” his wife added. “How rude of us! I must apologize.” The two hurried to recast Concealment on each other. Their magical energy became gradually harder and harder to sense, until

most in the house couldn't sense it at all. When he was satisfied, Flio led the couple to the first-floor living room.

"But I must say," the husband said, "the barrier you've erected around this house is *marvelous*. If you hadn't created a pathway to the front door, I might never have made it here!"

Flio winced at the vampire's words. "We've had a great number of guests here to visit Mister Ghozal or Mister Sleip. We had to open up the barrier around the front entrance to make sure you could all get in."

When they reached the living room, Tanya led the children back upstairs to bed, while Rys came downstairs to prepare tea for the guests.

"Hm?" Rys said, smiling at the sight of the guests Flio had led into the room. "I was wondering who it was! If it isn't Master Selestutz and his wife!"

"G-Goodness!" cried Selestutz. "Are you Ser Fenris, the lupine demon?! To think the little tomboy I knew would grow up to be such a beautiful woman!"

"You really have grown up beautifully," his wife agreed. "Back then, you were always covered in someone's blood..."

"I still remember you defeating that nasty giant who was so mean to you! You were just a little girl back then..."

"Or the time you vanquished the renegade lizardmen all on your own!"

The two went on, regaling each other with tales of Rys's old exploits. Rys looked back at them, her body trembling. "E-Excuse me... P-Perhaps that's enough stories about me for today? Ah ha ha ha ha..." she laughed nervously. Rys worked hard to make sure her husband saw her as proper and ladylike. In the face of so many stories about her past as a fearsome warrior, her smile was becoming increasingly strained. "Tell me... Where have you two been living as of late?"

"Ever since we were exiled from the Dark Army, we've been spending our time alone together in our old castle, deep in the mountains around the Dark Citadel."

"But my, Rys, you really did grow into a beautiful woman..."

“Didn’t she just! Why, I remember when you were a little thing, chasing around a snake ten times your size. You were such a little tomboy...”

“Would you please...*please* not talk about that?” Rys asked, trying desperately to change the subject. But Selestutz and his wife seemed to view Rys as something like a granddaughter. They regarded her fondly, barely pausing their stories for a second. Rys was powerless to stop them.

Flio slowly took to his feet. “O-Oh!” Rys exclaimed. “My lord husband, are you going to summon Ghozal? Perhaps I should—”

“It’s okay, Rys,” Flio said, giving her one of his easygoing smiles. “I can handle it myself.” *I’m sorry, Rys, he thought as began to ascend the stairs to the second floor. But Mister Selestutz and his wife look so happy to see you. I’ll be down with Ghozal in a second. You just keep them company until then...*

“M-My lord husband...” Rys protested.

“Now, now, Rys,” said Selestutz. “It’s been so long since we’ve seen you! Talk with us some more about old times.”

“Speaking of old times, you even got in a few tussles with Lord Ghol’s younger brother, didn’t you? I remember you leaving him rather black and blue!” Selestutz’s wife reminisced, smiling fondly as she chatted on.

My lord husband... Rys thought, forcing herself to smile as the pair continued to discuss her misspent youth. *Please hurry!*

A few minutes later, Flio arrived with Ghozal in tow. “Well, if it isn’t Selestutz and his wife!” said Ghozal. “Welcome!”

“Oh! Lord Ghozal! How long has it been?”

“I am honored to be in your presence once more!”

Ghozal smiled and nodded as Selestutz and his wife smiled happily, bowing and bowing.

“We heard the news that your wives are with child! We simply had to hurry over and give our blessings!”

“I quit the Dark Army, you know,” Ghozal said. “You don’t gotta call me ‘Lord.’” He quickly settled into chatting happily with the vampire couple.

“You weren’t a moment too soon, my lord husband...” said Rys. “I don’t know how much more I could have endured...” She looked over at Ghozal and his friends, an exhausted smile on her face.

Flio pulled her into a gentle embrace. “Thank you for keeping them occupied, Rys. You did good.”

“I am glad to be of service to my lord husband...” Rys said. “Or so I would like to say...” She smirked, resting her head against Flio’s chest. “But I must say, it seems there have been more demons coming to offer Ghozal their blessings every day...”

“You’re not wrong...” Flio said, pressing his head against Rys’s.

Ghozal was currently living at Flio’s house disguised as a demihuman, but before that, he had been known as the mightiest Dark One in history. “*I quit the Dark Army,*” he was fond of saying. “*I don’t consider myself a demon anymore.*” He meant it honestly, and hadn’t spoken a word about his wives’ pregnancies to anyone having anything to do with demonkind. And yet, there was no end to his visitors.

“I don’t think Ghozal’s spoken to his demon acquaintances about his wives’ pregnancies at all. I wonder how they all found out...?”

“Now that you mention it...” Rys said. “I don’t think Uliminas or Sleip have told anyone either...”

The two lowered their heads, puzzling over this new mystery.

◇Meanwhile, in the Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store...◇

The Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel Branch Store was located right in front of the Dark Citadel itself, a symbol of the peace between the Dark Army and the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Unlike the Houghtow store, it was open late into the night—many demons were nocturnal, after all. Behind the register tonight were the goblins Hokh’hokton and Maunty.

“Thank you for your payment, good sir!” said Hokh’hokton.

“And thanks for visiting our store!” added Maunty.

The two goblins lived and worked on Blossom’s farm. They had originally been

with the Dark Army, but they felt indebted to Flio and Blossom for sparing their lives and had pledged themselves to their service.

“You know, Maunty,” Hoky’hokton said to his companion after the customer had left, “with the Fli-o’-Rys General Store in crisis, now is the perfect time for us to take the spotlight!”

“You said it!” Maunty agreed. “With Lord Ghozal’s wives, Lady Uliminas and Lady Balirossa, pregnant and unable to work, us goblins must pick up the slack!”

“Quite right!” said Hoky’hokton. “I am quite proud of my stamina, you know. Every day, after my chores at the farm, I come here to work! Ah ha ha! Behold! I will guide this store through these trying times!”

“And make a tidy sum, at that!” said Maunty. “I need the money to support my wife and thirty-one kids!”

“What?! Wait a moment, Maunty. Did you have more children again?!”

“Yes! They were born just the other day! It must be a blessing that it happened at the same time as Lord Ghozal’s wives’ pregnancies! Personally, I don’t mind if they’re a bit rough-and-tumble, as long as my kids grow up healthy.”

“A-Ah,” said Hoky’hokton. “I see... Well, let’s both do our best. You, at raising your children, and me, at hunting for a wife...”

They chattered on as they briskly did their work. Meanwhile, all throughout the store, demons were whispering to each other.

“D-Did you hear what those goblins just said?”

“I did! I can’t believe Lord Gholl’s wives are pregnant...!”

“Lord Gholl was an amazing ruler—nothing like the useless deserter of a Dark One we have now...”

“Maybe I should go offer him my blessings...”

Hoky’hokton and Maunty went on spreading word of Ghozal’s wives’ pregnancies through sheer carelessness. Then, the information spread from demon to demon, many of whom opted to pay Ghozal a visit. Even Flio and Rys had no idea what was happening.



“Uliminas and Balirossa wanted to see you too,” Ghozal said, “but they’re taking it easy, what with the births so close. I hope you understand.”

“Of course, of course!” said Selestutz. “This is the critical period! I understand completely.”

“To think, Lord Ghozal’s children!” marveled his wife. “I’m sure they’ll be adorable and full of energy. They’re yours, after all!”

Rys came over to the table, bringing Ghozal and the vampire couple a fresh pot of tea, while Flio watched from a short distance away. *Demons sure do admire Ghozal!* he thought, smiling kindly.

Tanya stepped up next to Flio. “Master Flio...”

“What is it, Tanya?” Flio asked.

“Master, the count of the necrobats and his wife, as well as the chief of the thanatos owls, are here to offer their blessings to Master Ghozal. Shall I let them in...?”

Flio grimaced. “I see...” he said. “It seems like we have quite a number of guests today. Rys and I can take care of this. Tanya, you go rest.”

“What are you saying?” Tanya said, biting her lip from stress. “I am the maid of Master Flio’s house! I could never leave the master of the house himself to tend to the guests’ needs! I should be preparing a pot of tea right now!”

Tanya had been taking care of the house while also doing customer service for the Fli-o’-Rys General Store, all to utmost perfection, but for some reason, the tea she made was absolutely terrible. *It doesn’t seem like she’s necessarily doing anything wrong...* Flio thought. He winced, remembering what had happened the last time he had asked Tanya to make tea.

“You see the guests in,” Flio said. “Rys can handle the tea.”

“Understood, Master,” Tanya said, lifting her skirt in an elegant curtsy. “I shall show the guests inside.” She turned and headed towards the entrance.

Rys stepped up beside Flio. “If it’s like this *before* the births, how many more demons will come to visit us once the children are born?”

“Good point...” Flio said. “I’m not sure I can imagine it. Or maybe I just don’t want to.”

The two looked over at the table where Ghozal was chatting animatedly with Selestutz and his wife. Just then, Sleip, who had been staying in the same room as Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri, burst into the living room.

“Someone, come quick!” he said. “A-All three of them went into labor at once! The babies could be here any second!”



“To think I would have the honor of assisting in the birth of Lord Ghozal’s children!” Lady Celestutz was beside herself, crying tears of joy. “I hardly know what to say!”

“I have the water,” Rys said. “Someone fetch a towel!” Rys entered the room, carrying an enormous bucket of hot water as if it weighed nothing at all. She had firsthand experience with childbirth and knew how important water would be.

Elinàsze and Garyl trotted up, each carrying a massive pile of towels in their arms.

“Here’s the towels from the dresser, mama!” Elinàsze said.

“I have some towels too!” said Garyl.

“Mama! I brought some too! I brought some too!” Wyne followed closely behind the twins. In her hands was not a pile of towels but an entire dresser! So burdened, she found herself unable to make it through the room’s door—the edges of the dresser bumped up against the doorframe.

Belano ran up to Wyne, clearly frazzled. “W-Wyne, calm down, please...!”

Belano was the final member of Balirossa’s old knightly company—the witch. Now that they had all quit the knighthood, she lived with the other three at Flio’s house and taught defensive magic at the Houghtow College of Magic. Sometimes, if she had time off from her work at the school on a day Fli-o’-Rys was open for business, she would stop in to help out at the store.

But Wyne never listened to anyone when she got worked up like this. “Geh!”

she cried. “It won’t go in! It won’t go in!”

“O-Oh, no... W-Wyne, please... Calm down!” Belano begged.

But it was too late. Wyne backed up, readying herself to charge and bash through the wall above the doorframe into the room. But Belano leapt into action, grabbing Wyne tightly around the waist and casting Gravitation.

Belano had learned Gravitation from Flio, but when Flio cast the spell, it was much stronger than Belano’s version. It wasn’t enough to stop Wyne, who charged forward. But when all hope seemed lost, Minilio came running up, grabbing Wyne from the other side and helping Belano pull using his own Gravitation spell.

Minilio was a magic doll created by Flio. He looked like a younger version of Flio himself, hence the name. Sometimes he would use magic to grow to adult size and interface with customers as if he were the real Flio.

Minilio’s spell did the trick. “H-Hwuh?!” Wyne exclaimed. “I-I can’t move! I can’t move!”

“Th-Thank you, Minilio...” Belano said. Minilio simply smiled and nodded.

Belano looked up to Flio as something of a surrogate for her departed brother and father, and Minilio looked like a younger version of Flio. A smile from him was a reliable way to turn Belano’s face red.

Wyne flailed helplessly, immobilized by the Gravitation spell. Blossom and Sybe, in its unicorn rabbit form, were waiting restlessly in the hallway outside along with the necrobat counts and the rest. Inside the room, Flio, Hiya, and Damalynas were tending to Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri by continually casting healing spells. Uliminas may have been a demon, but Balirossa and Byleri were both humans giving birth to children of demonic heritage. It was placing considerable stress on their bodies. It was going well enough thanks to the efforts of Flio and the other spellcasters, but still, the women’s faces would spasm now and then in pain.

Ghozal took Uliminas’s and Balirossa’s hands firmly in his.

“Ghozal...”

“Sir Ghozal...”

The two looked up at their husband and nodded, reassuring him that they would be all right. Next to them, Sleip and Byleri were holding hands as well.

“How are you holding up, Byleri?” Sleip asked. “Dealing with the pain all right? You just have to hold on for a little while longer...”

“Don’t worry,” Byleri said. “I’m, like, totally okay. You can relax...”

“B-But I...”

“Like, seriously! Look at Mister Ghozal! He’s, like, totally calm, y’know?”

“I... I suppose so...” Sleip admitted. Sleip had been the opposite of Ghozal, pacing nervously about the room, unable to calm down. He seemed to be in a state of significant nerves, quite unbecoming of the onetime head of the Infernal Four. The whole room shared an amused smirk at his expense.

“Don’t worry, Mister Sleip,” Flio said. “It’s almost done.”

“Y-Yes, Mister Flio, I understand that,” Sleip said. “But—”

Sleip never finished his sentence, though, because just then, the sound of a baby crying filled the room.

First Uliminas’s child, then Balirossa’s, and finally Byleri’s, were all born without incident.



“Hrm,” Ghozal said, hugging Uliminas and Balirossa tight. “You both did great.” Beside them, the newborn babies were lying next to each other, asleep. The three embraced, looking over at their children.

Next to them, Sleip was celebrating in his own way. “You did it, Byleri! You gave birth to our child!” He was clasping both of her hands in his, sobbing such tears of joy that it looked like waterfalls were streaming down his cheeks.

“Like, Lord Sleip...” Byleri said. “You’ll, like, upset the babies if you’re too loud...” Smiling with forbearing fondness, she wrapped her arms around Sleip and pulled him in close. He pressed his face against her bosom and began to weep all the more.

She might have been imagining it, but Byleri could have sworn she saw the babies plug their fingers in their ears as if to say, *“Keep it down!”*

“Wow! The babies are adorable!” Elinàsze gasped.

“They really are super cute,” agreed Garyl.

“Really, really! Super cute!” chimed in Wyne. The three of them were holding towels in their arms, watching the babies from nearby the bed.

Garyl took a closer look at the baby who happened to be closest to him—Uliminas’s child. “So this one’s a girl, huh?” he said, grinning. “She’s way cute!”

“Bwah,” the baby said.

“Huh,” said Garyl. “This baby’s face is kinda red.”

“It is! It is!” Wyne chimed in, pressing her face up right next to Garyl’s. “I bet she’s blushing ’cause she thinks you’re cute, Gare-Gare!”

The baby wrapped her arms around Garyl’s face, crying out a happy “Ga-ga!” She flailed her arms at Wyne as if to say, *“Don’t touch my Garyl!”* But Wyne was in too high spirits to even notice she was being shooed away.

Once the babies were all safely born, a joyous mood settled over the bedroom. Flio watched everyone resting in the bed with his usual easygoing smile as Rys, who had just finished cleaning up, stepped up beside him.

“I’m glad the children were all born healthy,” she said.

“Yes, I am too.” Flio nodded in agreement. Then, he glanced over at Lady Selestutz and the necrobat count and the rest. “Although...”

“Yes, my lord husband?” asked Rys.

“With so many demons coming to offer their blessings while they were pregnant, how many more do you suppose will come now that the children are born...?”

“I must apologize,” Rys answered. “I believe it’s somewhat beyond my ability to imagine. Perhaps we had best keep this a secret from the Dark Army for a little while...”

“I agree,” said Flio. “I think that would be best.”

Rys's smile twitched. Flio nodded his head in understanding.

Outside the window, a giant crow sat watching. There had been so much running about for the births that nobody in the house had noticed it—not even Flio.

The following morning, the children were given names. Uliminas named her daughter Folmina, after her favorite flower. Balirossa's son's name was taken by combining parts of Ghozal's name and hers: Ghor. And Byleri's daughter was named Rislei using a similar scheme: "ri" from Byleri, and "slei" from Sleip.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

Flap, flap, flap! A dire crow flew into the throne room and alighted in front of the Dark Regent Calsi'im. "*Caw! Ca-Caw—!*"

"Oh, indeed?" said Calsi'im, his skull rattling merrily as he nodded. "Lord Ghozal and Lord Sleip's children, you say?"

Calsi'im had been running the Dark Army since the Dark One Yuigarde had vanished. He refused to sit on the throne, saying it would be "*presumptuous*" for a temporary standin like himself. Instead, he had a cloth laid out beside the throne where he sat. His minion, the magic doll Tia, was always by his side.

"Excuse me, Tia," Calsi'im said, turning to her. "Would you mind notifying the residents of the Dark Citadel that the retired Dark One Ghozal's children have been born?"

"Understood. We will have those who wish to pay their respects disguise themselves as demihumans in order to visit. We are at peace with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, but I still believe prudence to be in order."

"Yes, yes, good idea, Tia! I can always count on that clever mind of yours!"

"If I am clever, Calsi'im, it is because you taught me well," Tia said, bowing graciously.

"I can't tell you how happy it makes me to hear that..." The skeleton sniffled.

Tia looked up at him. "Calsi'im..." She hesitated. "May I say something?"

“Hm? What is it, Tia?” Calsi’im asked, tilting his skull.

“No... Never mind. It’s nothing. I will deliver your notification.” She bowed again, deeply, and trotted out of the throne room. *Of course I can’t ask him that!* she thought. *But I wonder... Is there any way for a skeleton and a magic doll to...have a child together...?*

Magic dolls were an artificial life-form created by magic. They were said to not have emotions. But Tia’s cheeks were clearly flushed red with embarrassment as she walked along, muttering to herself.

“Well! I wonder what that was about...” Calsi’im mused as he watched Tia leave. He held out his arm. Suddenly, there was a sharp sound. *Crack!* Calsi’im looked and saw a deep crack in the bone. He sighed and turned to face the dire crow. “I’m sorry, my friend. Could I ask you to find the Dark One Yuigarde and Lady Phufun for me? And quickly, now!”

“Caw—!”

Good Sir Caw-lins the dire crow stepped up to Calsi’im and nuzzled him on his bony cheeks. Then, he spread his wings and took flight.

Calsi’im watched as he vanished into the sky. *He’s been a good familiar to me for many years... I’m sure he’s noticed it too. I’m afraid I’m almost out of time...*

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair◇

Hero Gold-Hair and his party were deep in the mountains, camping in a tent under a big tree off the side of the road. When morning came, they roused themselves and headed off into the forest. They came to a point where a couple of paths intersected, a large hole directly in the middle.

“Not bad!” Hero Gold-Hair nodded, satisfied. “It looks like the trap we set last night caught a magic beast!”

“Hey, you’re right!” Dawkson said, grinning as he nodded back at Hero Gold-Hair. “That one’ll fetch us some good money!”

Behind them, Valentine was cheering and jumping in the air with joy. “That means we get to eat something tasty! Ooh, I can’t wait!”

Tsuya smiled at Valentine. “I’ll do my beeest negotiating a priiice!” she said.

“So we can aaall eat tasty food!”

“That’s right!” said Hero Gold-Hair. “We’re counting on you, Tsuya! Our money is in your hands.”

“Just leave it to meee!” Tsuya declared, posing and flexing her right arm.

“All right, Valentine,” Hero Gold-Hair nodded. “Bind up that magic beast with the Threads of Evil!”

“Yes, right away!” Grinning seductively, Valentine entwined her fingers. Threads shot out from her fingertips. She swung her arms, moving in an elegant dance. Each time she did, the strands of thread wove together, becoming thicker and thicker. Finally, the threads plunged into the hole like a living creature. Upon reaching the bottom, they wrapped around the lifeless magic beast, tying it up.

“All right, Valentine and Dawkson,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “We’ll leave this to you. Tsuya and I will go check on the other traps.”

“Kay, ’kay!” sang Valentine. “Good luck!”

“Yeah!” said Dawkson. “We’ll take care of this one, same as always.”

“And don’t forget—” Hero Gold-Hair started.

“Yeah, I got it,” said Dawkson. “We gotta fill the hole back in when we’re done, right?”

“Exactly!” Hero Gold-Hair nodded. “I’m counting on you!” Hero Gold-Hair was surprisingly scrupulous about his traps. He made sure to fill in the holes when he was done, whether the traps had caught anything or not. “When Riliangiu gets back from scouting the area, we’ll head out for the nearest town.”

“Understood!” said Valentine.

Hero Gold-Hair and Tsuya left to check on the traps they had left deeper in the forest. “By the waaay, Hero Gooold-Hair,” Tsuya said. “Have you heeeard?”

“Hm? Heard what?”

“Weeeell, before Riliangiu went scoutiing this morning, she met a biiig group of demons going the other way!”

“Oh, yes! A huge party of demons heading for the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, wasn’t it?”

“The deeemons said that the retired Daaark One had kiiids! Did you hear thaaat?”

“Yes, that’s right. And they’re going to pay their respects?”

Tsuya lowered her gaze and looked up at Hero Gold-Hair, blushing and muttering to herself. She took Hero Gold-Hair’s hand in hers, pressing her chest up against his arm. And as they walked through the forest, she stared...

And stared...

And stared...

And stared...

And stared...

Hero Gold-Hair glanced at Tsuya out of the corner of his eye. He sighed. “You’re very easy to read. Did you know that?”

“I aaam? I had nooo idea...”

“A-Ahem!” Hero Gold-Hair cleared his throat. “Well, at the very least, I’d like us to wait until we aren’t on the run. A-And don’t cling to me like that! I don’t like it when you cling!”

“Awww...” Tsuya pouted, her eyes misting over. “Reeeally?”

Hero Gold-Hair couldn’t say no to those eyes. “Well... At least let go of me before we get back to everyone.”

“O-Okaaay! Thaaank you!” Tsuya’s eyes lit up and she pressed up even closer against Hero Gold-Hair’s arm.

As Valentine and Dawkson filled in the hole, a dire crow perched on a tree overhead, watching. But it was too far away for either of them to notice. It observed them for a while before flying off towards the north.

Chapter 3: Capriccio for the House of Flio

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

Uliminas and Balirossa gazed out the window from their second-story bedroom, each holding her child in her arms.

"The wind feels purrfect today..." Uliminas mused.

"It does," agreed Balirossa. "Folmina and Ghorro seem to be enjoying it as well."

It had only been a few days since their births, but the two babies had already grown quite large. Uliminas and Balirossa looked down at them and smiled.

"They'll be walking in a week, mew know."

"Yes," said Balirossa. "And then we must return to our work. I would hate to cause trouble for Lord Flio and everyone else."

The two looked out the window at the pasture in front of Flio's house. Sleip was in his centaur form, galloping fast. Byleri was riding on his back, holding Rislei from behind for safety as her child clung to Sleip's neck.

"Ha ha ha!" Sleip laughed. "You two having fun back there?"

"Totally!" said Byleri. "Feeling the wind when you run like that is totally the best!"

Like Folmina and Ghorro, Rislei had been growing up quickly. She was already able to take tottering steps. She loved riding on her father's back as he ran.

Uliminas and Balirossa smiled as they watched Sleip and his family. "Looks like they're having fun," said Uliminas. "Folmina can almost walk, mew know. I wonder if it'd be safe for her to take a ride on Sleip's back too..."

"I wonder..." said Balirossa. "Ghorro can't quite walk yet either. If he were to take a ride, I would insist on riding with him."

Uliminas looked out towards the road. Her brow furrowed. "What is *that*...?"

“Hm?” Balirossa echoed, following Uliminas’s gaze. Something was approaching the house. As it got closer, they could see that it was an enormous crowd of people, in rows that took up the entire width of the road, drawing closer and closer. The crowd stretched out of sight, over the crest of a hill.

Rys was hanging up the laundry to dry on the drying rack to the side of the entrance. Her eyes went wide when she saw them coming over the hill. “No... Could that be...demons arriving to celebrate the birth of Ghozal and Sleip’s children?!” She froze, a wet sheet dangling from her arms as she stared.

Sleip galloped up beside her from the pasture. “You think so too, Rys?”

“Yes...” She nodded. “I can’t think of any other reason so many demons would be headed towards our house...” Returning to her senses, she picked the laundry basket back up. “My lord husband and Ghozal are at the store. I’ll go summon them.” She took the laundry and ran back inside.

“All right,” said Sleip. “I suppose we’ll get Uliminas and Balirossa and go welcome the guests...” He let Byleri and Rislei down off his back and changed into human form, hurrying inside the house after Rys.

Uliminas and Balirossa were watching from the second-story window.

“I... I guess we’d better go get purrepared...” said Uliminas.

“Y-Yes,” agreed Balirossa. “We should head downstairs...”

They hurried down to the first floor.

◇Houghtow City—Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

It had only been a few minutes since opening, but the Fli-o’-Rys General Store was already bustling with customers. Flio was busy explaining one of the magic swords to Sireul, one of their regular customers, when he suddenly cocked his head. “Hm?”

“Is something wrong, Mister Flio?” Sireul asked.

“No, no,” Flio reassured him with one of his usual easygoing smiles. “It’s nothing to worry about.” *What’s this?* he thought. *A huge number of demons are coming towards our house! I don’t sense any hostility, at least...*

Just then, Rys burst into the store from the employee door behind the

register.

“Rys?” said Flio. “I suppose something really is happening, then?”

“Yes, my lord husband. The truth is...” Rys leaned in to whisper in his ear. “The truth is, an enormous crowd of demons is here to pay their respects to Ghozal and Sleip’s children...”

“I see,” said Flio. “I suppose Ghozal and I should return to the house for the time being, then.”

“I suppose so.” Rys nodded. “Good luck to all of us.”

Flio twitched one of his fingers and immediately vanished.

“H-Huh?!” exclaimed Sireul. Then, he felt a tap on his shoulders. He turned around to see Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile. “Huh?!” he repeated. “Weren’t you in front of me a second ago? When did you get back there?”

In fact, this was Minilio, disguised to take Flio’s form. Before returning to the house, Flio had stopped by the shop’s storeroom and switched places with Minilio, who had been creating magic items in the workshop. This was called Simultaneous Teleportation—a spell of Flio’s own invention. Flio cast Teleportation so often that he felt the need for a more convenient version of the spell. It had taken him almost no time at all to create an improved version.

Simultaneous Teleportation didn’t require the use of a portal. It also affected two people at once, bringing them to wherever Flio desired. The possibility of such a spell had been proposed by the storied Magical Research Center of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, but up until now, there had been nobody in the world who could cast it. It was considered to be one of several theoretical legendary spells. Flio, for his part, had no idea how outlandish the thing he had invented truly was.

Minilio had arrived on the shop floor already in Flio’s form. He smiled at Sireul and glanced at the sword in his hand.

“Am I imagining things,” Sireul said, “or did you just shrink? I must be getting tired...”

“In that case, perhaps I can recommend a potion for recovery?” Minilio

offered. Perhaps it was because Flio was unused to creating magic dolls, but unlike Tia, Minilio was unable to really open his mouth. Instead, he communicated telepathically.

“That would be good, I think,” said Sireul. “I’ll take one, then...”

“*Very good,*” said Minilio. “*Now, regarding this sword...*”

Sireul didn’t notice at all that Minilio’s words were telepathic rather than spoken. He kept on chatting away as if nothing at all had changed.

◇Flio’s House◇

Flio, Rys, and Ghozal, who had been tidying up the shop’s storeroom, exited a portal leading to Flio’s house. Flio glanced out through the front window. “Well, *that’s* going to be a handful...” he said, folding his arms as he looked over the parade of demons making their way towards the house.

“I knew there were a lot of them, but I didn’t expect *this* many...” said Rys, her eyes wide with shock.

“Hrm...” said Ghozal, nodding in agreement as he looked out the window. “Looks like a lot of them are old veterans who worked under me. They don’t have much magic power anymore, so I guess it’s no surprise you didn’t notice them. But even I couldn’t tell you who all of those demons are.”

Outside, Blossom, Maunty, and Hokh’hokton—who were normally working on the farm at this time of day—as well as Hiya and Damalynas, were doing their best to get the mass of demons to form an orderly line.

“It would be a shame to send them all away without any word from you or Mister Sleip...” Flio said.

“Hrm,” Ghozal agreed. “I can’t argue with that...”

As the two spoke, Uliminas and Balirossa descended the stairs with their babies. “This is quite the purrdicament, eh, Ghozal?” said Uliminas.

“No kidding,” Ghozal said. “Mister Flio was just saying that me and Sleip had better greet them one way or another. I don’t think they’ll be satisfied unless they get a glimpse of the babies...”

“Mew’re right,” Uliminas grimaced, lowering her head in thought. “But how

did the infurmentation get meowt so fast? We didn't tell the Dark Citadel... And Selestutz and the rest should have been keeping their meowths shut..." Nobody at the house had any idea that the Dark Regent's own familiar had told him of the birth, or that Calsi'im had notified the entire Dark Citadel.

In the notification, the demons had been told that the Ghozal was living disguised as a demihuman. They had been asked not to use their demonic powers while visiting. Half of their number were disguised as demihumans. They had come from all over, using private carriages rather than flying the colors of the Dark Army. And so, they had taken the household completely by surprise.

◇Houghtow College of Magic◇

Class was on recess at the Houghtow College of Magic. In Class A's classroom, a number of students were gathered around Garyl's desk. "There are *more* babies at your house, Lord Garyl?!" exclaimed Salina, astonished and excited. She squeezed her hands together, pressing them against her cheek.

Garyl grinned. "Yeah! Uncle Ghozal and Uncle Sleip had three babies between the two of them! They're all super cute."

"Oh, how lovely! I do hope I can meet them some time," said Salina. *And that would give me a pretext to visit Lord Garyl at his house!* she thought, pressing up closer to the object of her affections. *I must make a favorable impression on his mother and father as soon as I can, if I am to be his future bride...!*

Suddenly, Salina felt a plush cat pressed up against her face. "Mghf!" she grunted, forced back.

Irystiel forced her way between Salina and Garyl, pushing Salina away with her plushy. She held the cat in front of her own face. "Irystiel wants to see the babies with Garyl too!" she said, speaking through the plush cat using ventriloquism.

Leina Raina and Reptor crowded in close as well.

"I-I'd like to come too, if it's not too much of a bother..." said Leina.

"I wanna see the babies!" said Reptor.

“All right!” Garyl agreed. “Then let’s go to my house after school today!”

“Thank you!” said Irystiel’s plush. “Irystiel is delighted!”

“Really?” said Leina. “I can’t wait!”

“I wonder what the babies will be like!” said Reptor.

Behind them, Salina furrowed her brows. “J-Just a minute, you three! I was the one who asked first! Why must I be accompanied by you lot?!”

Garyl gave Salina a light smack on the top of the head with the edge of his hand. “Don’t say that, Salina! Babies are super cute, y’know. I want everyone to see them!”

“L-Lord Garyl...” Salina looked up at him, her cheeks growing pink. In her mind, Garyl’s words were edited from “*Babies are super cute, y’know*” to “*Our babies will be super cute, y’know.*” She blushed harder, getting lost in her thoughts. *So...this is practice for when Lord Garyl and I have children!* “I understand!” she said, grinning goofily as her eyes went heart-shaped. “I, Salina, for Lord Garyl’s sake and for the sake of all the people, shall accompany you!”

Irystiel pushed her back again using the cat plush.

“Mghf! Wh-What was that for?” Salina protested.

“Irystiel says you were annoying her,” the plush explained.

“Excuse me? You can’t push me just because I’m annoying you!” Salina fumed.

Irystiel looked the other way, ignoring her.

Their classmates’ eyes were focused on the pair’s antics. *Oh boy, they’re at it again...* the students were thinking. *Those two are always arguing...but I think they like each other?*

As Salina and Irystiel bickered, Elinàsze stepped up from behind Garyl. “Garyl, the babies are still very young,” she said. “If you’re going to invite people to our house, make sure it’s only a few friends.”

“Okay, got it! It’ll just be Salina, Irystiel, Leina, and Reptor!” said Garyl.

Elinàsze looked over the group and smiled.

Meanwhile, Wyne, who was peeking in the window from outside the classroom, grinned widely. “What’s this, what’s this?!” she exclaimed. “Gare-Gare and Eli-Eli look like they’re having fun!”

Wyne adored her adoptive younger siblings. Although she was still physically immature, Wyne was already past the human age of maturity. She wasn’t allowed to attend class with the lower grade students, but she still came to secretly check on her brother and sister whenever she could. She was flapping her dragon wings, flying outside the window—in plain sight of the classroom on the other side of the hallway.

“Look,” one of the students said. “That dragon girl is back!”

“I think she’s Garyl and Elinàsze’s older sister,” said another. “You know, the two from Class A.”

“She really loves her brother and sister, doesn’t she?”

Wyne’s attention, however, was focused on Elinàsze and Garyl. She didn’t hear them at all.

◇Later—In Front of Flio’s House◇

Hiya and Damalynas, along with the farmworkers Blossom, Hokh’hokton, and Maunty, worked together to divide the demons into three orderly queues, lined up along the road. Ghozal, Uliminas, and Balirossa stood before the crowd, now having changed into formal wear. Uliminas and Balirossa were holding Folmina and Ghoros in their arms.

“Everyone,” Ghozal began, “thank you for coming all this way just to visit a retired man like me.”

The demons all raised their voices in a cheer. Thinking quickly, Ghozal raised his arms, activating the defensive barrier Flio had put up around the house to prevent the demons’ clamor from being heard all the way in Houghtow City.

“Well, I’d hate to disappoint you after your long trip,” said Ghozal. “Behold—my children!” He spread his arms wide, and his wives bowed deeply. Uliminas

was wearing a red dress, while Balirossa was wearing a men's dress uniform. They both looked stunningly beautiful. The demons let out another cheer at the sight.

Before long, they were advancing one at a time to meet Ghozal and his wives. First, they would offer their congratulations to Ghozal and shake his hand, then they would give Uliminas and Balirossa their regards in turn and be given a view of the children.

Sleip, meanwhile, was running around the pasture with Byleri riding on his back, their baby in her arms. A few demons noticed him and waved.

"Oh! Is that Lord Sleip, the former Infernal?"

"And I believe that's his wife and child on his back!"

Flio and Rys were shepherding the demons who wished to give their blessings to the former Dark One and his wives.

Rys leaned in to whisper in her husband's ear. "If anyone starts dawdling, we need to hurry them along by any means necessary..."

"I know," Flio whispered back. "But everyone's being pretty courteous about it." It was true—the demons weren't lingering overlong at all. They finished their introductions, had a look at the babies, and promptly stepped away. Thanks to their mindful behavior, the line was moving along at a fairly fast clip. But more demons disguised as demihumans kept showing up, hour after hour, so the line was only getting longer.

Flio heard Hiya's telepathic voice in his head. *"Exalted One. If we are to proceed to allow the demons to queue up along the road, the back end of the line will soon stretch to Houghtow City itself."*

"Hmm..." Flio said back. *"That might be a problem."* He lowered his head. *What should I do?* he thought to himself. Then, an idea struck him. *Oh, I could copy that thing Hiya does all the time!* He held out his hands, and a large magic circle appeared at his fingertips.

"Mister Flio, what are you doing?" asked Ghozal, peering dubiously at Flio's spell.

“Oh!” said Flio, his usual easygoing smile on his face. “I just thought of a way to help make the line a bit more manageable!”

The event went on for several hours. “What an adorable child!” a sickle-weasel woman squealed as she got a look at Folmina and Ghoro, who were being held in their mothers’ arms. She pressed her hands to her cheeks, unable to contain her excitement. “Why, I’ve never been happier in my life!”

Uliminas and Balirossa bowed politely.

“Well, thank mew fur saying so!”

“I am much obliged for your kind words.”

Ghozal nodded. “Thanks for coming all this way.”

All around the three was an expanse of pure white space. The queue stretched out ahead of them long as ever, but now, it was situated in this blank abyss. This was Flio’s mental world—his mindscape. It was something he had learned from Hiya, who spent most of their time inside their own mental world. This had inspired Flio to invite the enormous crowd of demons inside his mindscape.

Flio had spent the past few hours sitting in front of the house—where Ghozal had previously been standing—focusing with his eyes shut. He had conjured a pair of portals with two more magic circles. New arrivals could enter through the door on the right, and once they had finished meeting Ghozal’s children, they could leave through the door on the left.

Hiya stood beside Flio, giving directions to the guests. “Right this way, honored guests,” they said, smiling pleasantly.

Damalynas stood by the other door, directing the departing guests away. “All right! Leave in this direction, please! Take care on your trip home!”

“Thank you for having us!” said some as they made their way back towards the road they had come from.

Others had parting remarks more along the lines of, “On the contrary, thank *you* for giving us the opportunity to behold the children of Lord Ghozal! I will

never forget this for as long as I live!”

Suddenly, Flio opened his eyes and spoke. “I gotta say...” He grimaced, still keeping his control of the portals and his mindscape. “It’s really hard to keep the mindscape up with so many people inside it. I can’t believe you do this all the time, Hiya!”

Hiya shook their head insistently, a bead of sweat running down their brow. “E-Exalted One... It is true that I sustain my mindscape in perpetuity. But bringing thousands of individuals inside it at once... That would be far beyond me.”

There was no time to discuss the matter. though. The next guests came almost immediately, forcing them to put it aside. Flio once again closed his eyes, concentrating his mind and magic on stabilizing his mindscape.

Hiya kept stealing sidelong glances at Flio as they guided demons through the portal. *His power would be more than sufficient to conquer the world, but he would rather use it to help his friend. Truly, the Exalted One has transcended worldly desire...*

Hiya couldn’t help smiling despite themselves.

◇Evening—In Front of Flio’s House◇

After school that evening, Elinàsze and Garyl brought their friends home with them.

“S-So that’s Lord Garyl’s father...” said Salina, watching the proceedings with her mouth agape in disbelief. “Incredible...”

Irystiel nodded, as did her plush cat. “All these people here to celebrate...” the cat said. “Irystiel never expected such an incredible number...”

“There *are* a lot of people...” said Leina Raina. “But what I can’t believe is that magic space he’s created! It’s incredible!”

“No kidding!” agreed Reptor. “A magic space you can fit thousands of people in at one time? I’ve never heard of an incredible spell like that!”

“Precisely.” Elinàsze nodded. “Papa is simply incredible, isn’t he?”

Elinàsze was usually a modest and reserved girl, but with so many people

calling her beloved father “incredible,” she couldn’t help joining in.

The children watched as Ghozal greeted demon after demon and Uliminas and Balirossa showed them the babies. But Flio’s mindscape was simply too *incredible* for them to be able to talk about anything else for a while.



Eventually, Elinàsze and Garyl’s friends went home, and the sun set.

“My apologies,” said Flio. “But we’ll have to stop here for today.”

They put up a sign in front of the house: “Greetings have concluded for the day. If you have urgent business...et cetera.” And then, they went back inside.

The group gathered in Flio’s living room. “Well, somemeow, we made it through the day...” said Uliminas.

“Yes,” agreed Balirossa. “And what a day it was...”

Uliminas and Balirossa settled into their chairs, sighing with relief. Folmina and Ghoros were sleeping peacefully in their arms.

“You did good, you two,” said Ghozal, patting both of them on the back.

“Mew were working the hardest of all,” said Uliminas.

“You were,” agreed Balirossa. “Thank you for everything...”

Ghozal smiled and bowed his head. Then, he turned to where Flio was sitting in his own chair. “Sorry to ask so much of you, Mister Flio,” he said, clapping his hands on Flio’s shoulder and slumping his shoulders.

Flio, however, smiled the same easygoing smile as always. “It’s nothing. We’re friends and housemates, after all.”

“Friends?” Ghozal smiled. “Hrm. I suppose so. Thank you, friend.” He held out his hand. Flio gave it a firm shake. The rest of the room couldn’t help smiling at the happy scene.

Rys stepped up behind Flio. “Now, our *next* order of business...” she said, peering at the far end of the living room where Sybe’s hutch stood, big enough to accommodate it in its psychobear form. Next to it was an empty space for the children to play, but currently, it was occupied by a mountain of gifts they

had been given by their demonic well-wishers.

“Those,” Rys said. “The gifts we couldn’t quite squeeze into not one but *two* magic bags.” She held up the two bags for effect, smirking wryly. “In any event, we made a point of getting the perishable gifts in the bags first. There’s no hurry to get rid of the excess gifts. But we can’t just leave them on the floor there, can we?”

“I agree,” said Ghozal. “Here, I’ll handle this. Lemme just tidy up a bit.” He went to pick up one of the gifts. “Hrm? This is a deed to a manor on Chiuya Slope! And this one’s a castle in Tocana Forest! Hrm... These are pretty expensive gifts...”

“What was that?” asked Flio, impressed and surprised. “You got a manor and a castle?”

“Huh...?” Garyl looked worried. “Manors and castles? Uncle Ghozal...are you going to move away?”

Ghozal walked up to Garyl and gave him a gentle pat on the head. “I’d like to stay here as long as your father will have me, actually,” he said. “I kinda like living with so many friends!”

“Of course!” said Flio, giving Ghozal one of his smiles. “You’re very welcome. You’re one of my most important friends as well, Mister Ghozal.”

“Hooray!” cheered Garyl, jumping into the air. “I don’t have to stop training with Uncle Ghozal!”

“Mister Flio,” said Sleip. “If I may be so bold, might I be one of your friends as well?” Byleri and Rislei were both sound asleep. Sleip was carrying them in his arms—his wife in one and daughter in the other.

“I would be happy to be your friend!” Flio agreed readily, smiling cheerfully. Sleip smiled back.

Just then, Tanya entered the living room wearing her maid outfit. “Everyone, thank you for your hard work today. I have completed my preparations for dinner. Do I have your permission to serve it?”

“Yes,” said Rys. “We can deal with the gifts later. First, we should have a

meal!”

“All right, let’s get to our seats, everyone,” said Flio.

The party, who had converged around the pile of presents, made their way back to the dining table.

“I’ll help serve the food, mama!” said Elinàsze.

“Oh! Me too!” chimed in Garyl.

“Me too! Me too! Nom, nom, nom...” said Wyne.

Elinàsze was indignant. “Big sis Wyne! Do you already have food in your mouth?!”

As the children made their way to the kitchen, Flio suddenly remembered something. “Ah, yes, that’s right!” he said, reaching into his Bottomless Bag and producing a bottle. The flask was a type they often used for potions, but the contents shone with all the colors of the rainbow. “I made this healing potion from the materials I picked up the other day. It seems like today’s been a lot on everyone, so go ahead and have one if you like.”

Ghozal, Sleip, Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri each took one of Flio’s potions.

“Meow’re right,” said Uliminas. “I’m exhausted. Thanks fur the potion.” She popped the bottle open and knocked the potion back in a single gulp.

“Mreow?!” Her body shone with a brilliant light for just a second before returning to normal. “Th-This potion is something else! I-It’s like I’m good as mew! I have meowre magic power than ever! A-And...I think my skin’s even gotten smewther!”

“What?!” exclaimed Balirossa.

“Huh?!” cried Byleri.

“Really?!” asked Rys.

The three looked curiously at their own potions. The next second, the rainbow-colored liquid vanished down their throats. Just as had happened to Uliminas, their bodies were enveloped with light for just a second.

“I-It’s true!” said Balirossa, her eyes going wide as she opened her own status

window to check her condition. “I usually have scarcely any magic power, but it seems that this potion has given me a respectable amount!”

“But like...” began Byleri, who was checking out her reflection in the windowpane. “More importantly, y’know, it, like, totally *did* make my skin smoother!”

“My lord husband,” asked Rys, holding the empty bottle in both hands as she nuzzled up to Flio, “do you plan to sell this potion?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s the plan,” Flio answered, slightly flustered by the sudden show of affection. “Right now, I’m working on building our supply, but I was thinking of eventually selling them.”

“May I perhaps have some more of this delightful potion?” Rys asked.

“M-Me too!” said Balirossa. “I would like more too, please!”

“Like, can I have another also, Lord Flio?” begged Byleri.

The three of them crowded around Flio, clamoring for more of the potion, when another resident of the house came up from behind.

“Can I have one of those too, Lord Flio?” asked Blossom. “I’d love to have something to bring some of the smoothness back to my skin after getting sunburned in the fields all day! That looks perfect!”

Next was Belano. “M-May I have some too? I get so tired when I stay up all night preparing practice tests...”

“So you’re telling me that potion would make my body even *more* alluring...” mused Damalynas.

“Exalted One,” begged Hiya, “please allow your humble servant a dose as well...”

Then, Tanya came up to him. “Master Flio, I would like to requisition one of these potions...to improve my efficiency as a maid.”

The women of Flio’s house were eager to get their hands on his new handiwork. Flio looked over the assembled crowd with a tight-lipped smile. *I... I guess it does work pretty well...* he thought. *But I wasn’t expecting it to be so popular!* He acquiesced, giving all of them another dose of the potion.



◇One Month Later—Flio's House◇

It had been a month since Ghozal's and Sleip's children were born. The number of new guests had declined, of course, but Flio's house was still getting a number of repeat demon guests every day. Flio had set a ground rule of refusing to take guests after sunset, and for the most part, the demons respected it. But one night, a woman came to visit the house. She arrived on their doorstep, accompanied by a number of guards, and knocked on the door.

From inside the house came the loud sound of someone running down the hall. "I knew it!" cried Garyl. "It's Ellie! Come in!"

The woman Garyl had called Ellie was in fact none other than the Maiden Queen of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode herself.

"I-I must apologize for calling on you so late at night," she said. "I sent a letter ahead concerning my visit, which your lord father most graciously accepted. But I am afraid that due to a variety of pressing circumstances, I was unable to pay a visit until this hour." She made to bow deeply, but Garyl took her by the hand and pulled her inside.

"You don't gotta be so formal! Come in, come in!"

"G-Garyl?!" Flustered and discombobulated, Ellie allowed Garyl to lead her inside by the hand. "T-Tell me, Garyl..." she said. "Have you gotten bigger again?"

"Who knows!" said Garyl with a grin. "I have no idea!"

Ellie's eyes went wide. *I've scarcely had time to see him since I've been so busy dealing with the aftermath of the peace treaty with the Dark Army...* she thought. *He looks even more grown-up and handsome than ever...* Despite herself, a pink blush crept into her cheeks.

Garyl led Ellie into the living room where they were met with a girl blocking their path. "No!" she declared. The girl had dark skin and a short horn growing out of her forehead. Right now, her cheeks were puffed out in a pout as she glared daggers at Ellie.

"E-Excuse me...who is this young lady?" the Maiden Queen asked.

“Oh, this is Folmina!” said Garyl. “She’s Uncle Ghozal and Uliminas’s kid!”

“My! Then this is the daughter of Lord Ghozal!” Ellie crouched down to meet Folmina’s gaze at eye level. “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Folmina. You may call me Ellie.” She smiled.

Folmina met Ellie’s smile with a fierce glare and yanked Garyl towards her by the arm. “Garyl is *my* big brother!” she declared, puffing her cheeks out even further.

Garyl winced. “Sorry about that, Ellie...” he said. “Folmina’s really attached to me for some reason. She gets angry whenever she sees me holding hands with a girl...”

Folmina’s face turned red as she held Garyl tighter. Ellie looked at the young girl and smiled brightly. “I see!” she said. “You love your big brother very much, don’t you, Folmina? I think I understand. Garyl is a very kind and dashing young man.”

Ellie’s words of praise for Garyl did the job. Folmina’s face lit up. “He is!” she said. “Big brother’s kind and dashing! I love him lots!” Ellie breathed a sigh of relief at the return of Folmina’s good mood.

Another girl, slenderer and taller than Folmina, came running down the stairs. “Oh, Folmina...” she said. “Are you bothering Garyl again?” She patted Folmina on the head for a second before noticing Ellie. “Oh! Do we have a guest? My name is Rislei. A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“What a polite young girl!” Ellie marveled. “You may call me Ellie.”

“And this is Ghoror,” Rislei went on. “He’s Folmina’s little brother.”

“Hm...?” Ellie’s eyes opened in surprise. She hadn’t noticed anyone but Rislei coming down the stairs. But there he was, clinging to his sister Folmina.

“Go on, Ghoror,” said Folmina. “Say hi.” Ghoror timidly looked up at their guest.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ghoror,” said Ellie. “I am...” But before she could finish her sentence, Ghoror had hidden himself behind Folmina.

Garyl smiled sheepishly. “Sorry about that, Ellie. Ghoror’s really, really shy. He’s always hiding behind Folmina...”

“I see,” said Ellie. “He must really love his big sister.”

Ghoro peeked his head out from behind Folmina and nodded meekly, blushing.

The plucky Folmina, the level-headed Rislei, and the bashful Ghoro... *They’re all so adorable!* Ellie thought. *Perhaps someday, when I am married, my children will be like that...* Without meaning to at all, she found herself staring at Garyl as she thought that.

Just then, Flio finally showed himself, startling Ellie out of her reverie. “Excuse me,” he said. “I hope the children haven’t been any trouble.”

Ellie shot up straight. “A-Ah! Oh, no, no, no, no, no! I was hoping to meet the children, actually! I’m very happy to have run into them here. They’re all so precious.” She cleared her throat and bowed deeply, trying to at least maintain a semblance of etiquette.

Flio smiled one of his easygoing smiles as he led Ellie to the first-floor parlor. “Mister Ghozal and Mister Sleip will be overjoyed to hear that, I’m sure,” he said.

◇Flio’s House—Second Floor◇

On the second floor of Flio’s house was the children’s room, where all of the house’s children stayed together: Flio’s twins, Elinàsze and Garyl, and his adopted daughter, Wyne; Ghozal’s children, Folmina and Ghoro; and Sleip’s child, Rislei. All six of them now shared a single large bed.

“Folmina, Ghoro, are you going to get ready for bed?” asked Rislei. “You shouldn’t keep Wyne waiting. Garyl, are you going to study before you sleep again?”

“I already finished my homework.” Garyl grinned. “I can go to sleep with everyone tonight.” *I wanted to talk more with Miss Ellie...* he thought. *It’s been so long since I’ve seen her! But she’s here to have some kind of important conversation with dad, so I shouldn’t get in the way...*

Folmina hugged Garyl tight. “Yaaaay!” she cheered. “I get to sleep with big brother Garyl!”

“If you’re happy, Folmina, I’m happy...” said Ghoros, smiling as he clung to the hem of Folmina’s clothes.

“All right,” said Rislei. “Then let’s go to bed. Wyne’s waiting for us.” She headed towards their bedroom, when...

“Riiisleeeee!!!” A man appeared at the far end of the hallway, bellowing Rislei’s name as he charged towards her.

Rislei furrowed her brow and wheeled around. “Gh! This again, papa...?!”

Indeed, the one running towards her was none other than her father Sleip. He picked her up and nuzzled his cheeks against hers lots and lots and lots. “Ooh! Rislei! You’re as cute as ever today! Sleep well tonight, won’t you?”

“I-I-I-I know! I will!” Rislei protested, her face turning red as she flailed her arms and legs. “N-Now let me go! You’re embarrassing me!”

But Sleip paid no heed to her struggles. He held her tight and nuzzled and nuzzled. Sleip was already up there in years by the time Rislei was born, and thus doted on his precious little girl. His wife Byleri loved their daughter too, of course, and doted on her an appropriate amount, but Sleip took it to another level entirely. He had been a bit too enthusiastic already when Rislei was a baby. But now that she was the equivalent of a five-year-old in terms of human development, it was far more affection than Rislei appreciated.

“Papa! I keep telling you to stop picking me up all the time!”

“Don’t be like that, Rislei! You know your papa loves you so, so, so, so, so much!”

“I-I-I-I know! I know you love me! Just... *Really*, papa!” Rislei furrowed her brow, but she seemed more embarrassed than that she actually disliked her father’s affection. *If you’re going to keep doing that, at least do it when nobody’s watching...* she thought as Sleip squeezed her tight.

Wyne and Elinàsze, who were already in the bedroom, came running out when they heard Rislei’s cries of protest. “Ah ha ha! Sleii-Sleii!” laughed Wyne. “Sleii-Sleii’s being all cutesy-cutesy again! Then I’m gonna be all cutesy-cutesy with Gare-Gare!” Her dragon wings appeared on her back and she soared down the hallway, hugging Garyl tight. She wasn’t wearing any underwear beneath

her nightclothes. Garyl could feel her soft chest pressing up against his body.

“Wah!” he cried, his face turning red at the touch. “Wyne! You’re embarrassing me!”

Elinàsze, meanwhile, was fixing Rislei, still in her father Sleip’s arms, with a piercing stare. *Rislei’s so lucky...* she thought. *I wish my papa would do that, even if it was only sometimes...* Her eyes glazed over and her cheeks turned pink as she watched.

Lately, Flio’s house was full of noise and commotion every day around bedtime.

◇Flio’s House—First-Floor Parlor◇

“Excuse me... Did I hear something? It sounded like a scream...” Ellie looked around the room, puzzled by the sounds of the scuffle happening above them on the second floor.

“Oh, no, it’s nothing,” said Flio, smirking wryly. “Please, pay it no mind.” Flio’s senses were easily sharp enough to tell what was happening on the second floor. *It looks like Mister Sleip and Wyne are getting a bit carried away again...* He wiggled his index finger almost imperceptibly, conjuring a tiny magic circle at his fingertips and blocking sound from the rest of the house past the parlor. With the sounds quieted, he showed the Queen and her guards into the parlor and sat down on a sofa facing them.

The Maiden Queen bowed her head deeply. Her guards followed suit. “First, I really must apologize for coming at this hour. It may have been a necessity to avoid prying eyes, but I realize it is quite inconvenient to you.”

“Oh, it’s perfectly all right,” said Flio. “You sent me a letter letting me know ahead of time. Besides, I’m generally awake at this time of night anyway. Now, what was it you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Well...” the Queen began. A rather modest smile crossed her face. “The truth is, about a month ago we received reports that a magic beast of phenomenal power had been detected. But almost as soon as it appeared, it was gone. We searched the area thoroughly but were unable to locate any trace of it. It is possible that the beast is in hiding and may one day go on a rampage. If such a

thing were to happen, the world itself might be in danger...” She looked very serious as she bowed once more. “I thought, Lord Flio, that with your magical prowess, you might be aware of what happened to the magic beast. That is what brings me here today. If you know anything at all, even the slightest detail, please let me know.”

As Ellie spoke, Rys entered the room carrying a pot of tea. “Oh?” she said. “This magic beast you mention...could it be the Calamity Wyrms my lord husband vanquished the other day?”

“Excuse me?!?!?” Ellie and her guards exclaimed at once.

Flio took the glowing gem out of his Bottomless Bag and held it out for all to see. The Maiden Queen gasped. She regarded the gem with a narrowed gaze. “What...is *this*?” she asked, her voice trembling. “It seems to be a magic circle condensed into a solid gem. But there’s something sealed inside...”

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile. “Yes, that’s the Calamity Wyrms I defeated the other day. As you can see, it’s sealed within that magic circle.”

The Maiden Queen’s eyes went wide. She froze on the spot. *I did think that this might have been what happened...* she thought, swallowing hard. *But did Lord Flio really defeat the Calamity Wyrms, one of the legendary Beasts of Disaster...?*

Everyone just stared, confused, at the gem containing the sealed Calamity Wyrms. Nobody could figure out what to say.

“Oh, that’s right!” said Flio, producing a bottle and setting it on the table. It was a standard bottle used to store potions. Its contents shone with all the colors of the rainbow. “This is a healing potion I made using the Calamity Wyrms’ blood. Please try it. Rys and all the other women of our house are big fans.” His calm smile didn’t falter for a second.

“O-Oh!” said Ellie. “Thank you very much!” Before Flio’s smiling face, she couldn’t think of anything else to say. *So he didn’t only vanquish a legendary magic beast—he made a potion from its blood as well...? This man is simply beyond belief!*

The clinic in the basement of the Dark Citadel also doubled as the laboratory of Phufun, minion of the rightful Dark One Yuigarde, but at present, per Dark Regent Calsi'im's instructions, it was being operated solely for its medical function. Doctor Mephisto, the mad scientist devil, watched his final patient of the day walk out of the clinic doors and heaved a powerful sigh. "That's the last one... Finally..."

"Finished with the day's labors, Doctor Mephisto?" Coqueshtti, the little mad scientist girl, stepped out from the neighboring room, a smile on her face.

Doctor Mephisto smiled dryly. "Such that they are," he said. "Nothing that we do here is out of the ordinary. Day after day, nothing but more demons looking for routine medical treatment. Compared to treating the wounds our comrades sustained in the war with the humans, or performing surgery to enhance the strength of demons under Lady Phufun's guidance, it hardly feels worth doing!"

Coqueshtti hastily brought a finger to her lips. "Doctor Mephisto, you know Lord Calsi'im has strictly prohibited that! You mustn't say such things!"

Doctor Mephisto sighed again. "Well, then, Coqueshtti. Allow me to ask you—are *you* satisfied with our current lot? To merely treat the medical problems of aging demons when we have the power to manipulate the body howsoever we wish?"

"Well..." Coqueshtti scratched the back of her head, mumbling shyly. "I *did* enjoy our time doing all sorts of things under Lady Phufun... But I think I like what we're doing now better. It makes me happy to see everyone go home healthy."

Doctor Mephisto sighed yet again. "How fortunate for you, that you can be satisfied with your peaceful life as a domesticated animal under Dark Regent Calsi'im."

"Tee hee hee!" Coqueshtti giggled, pressing her hands against her cheeks and squirming bashfully. "Oh my gosh! You really think I'm that lucky?"

"That was sarcasm! Don't take it as a compliment!" Doctor Mephisto rose from his seat and made his way towards the doors. "Now, I believe I will be returning to my private chambers."

“Okey dokey! Have a good evening!” Coqueshtti waved goodbye as Doctor Mephisto left.

My power! Being used for a bunch of damned peace-lovers! Doctor Mephisto fumed as he turned a corner and started up the stairs. His room was on the second floor of the Dark Citadel, but to get into the Dark Citadel itself from the clinic, he had to walk a distance through the forest. He had made it a short ways down the path when two women stepped out from behind the trees.

“We’ve been waiting, Doctor Mephisto,” yipped one.

“I take it from your expression that you’ve made up your mind?” yipped the other.

“Indeed,” Doctor Mephisto answered. “Rather than living this dull, peaceful life, this new dynasty you hope to build sounds far more entertaining. I, Doctor Mephisto, hereby pledge my allegiance to you.” He held his hand to his heart and bowed, long and deep.

The fox sisters Kintsuno the Gold and Gintsuno the Silver, dressed as ever in their gold and silver cheongsams, nodded in satisfaction.

“Are you certain of your information, Doctor?” asked Kintsuno.

“Of course I am certain,” Doctor Mephisto said. “Dark Regent Calsi’im has been having Coqueshtti and me give him longevity treatments out of the public eye, but even those are nearing their limit.”

“Then, with the Dark Regent Calsi’im gone, the Dark Army will fall into chaos!” cheered Kintsuno. “And in that window of opportunity...”

“...We’ll take over the Dark Citadel ourselves!” Gintsuno finished.

The pair of foxes laughed, hiding their mouths behind folding fans.

“You will have the support of myself and all my family,” Doctor Mephisto said. “So when the new Dark One takes the throne, I trust you will abide by our contract and give me a most cordial welcome...”

“Of course, of course!”

A deep, masculine laugh joined the chorus of sinister laughter as the new member of their group walked up. “Ahh!” exclaimed Doctor Mephisto. “You

must be the Shadow King, the human who has achieved the meritorious feat—alone of all monarchs in history—of having sat on both the throne of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode *and* the Dark Citadel! I am pleased to see you alive, Your Majesty.”

“Indeed I am!” The Shadow King snickered wickedly. “I had a rough time of things thanks to that ingrate Zanzibar, but scum like that are never going to be the end of me.”

“Well said! Words befitting the future Dark One!” Doctor Mephisto knelt down and bowed his head.

The Shadow King gazed down at Doctor Mephisto. *Hmph*, he thought. *Empty words. He is a demon, after all. He could betray me at any time. Well, I suppose I shall simply use him for everything he’s worth until the throne is mine!* A sneer crossed his face.

Doctor Mephisto glanced up at the Shadow King and smiled, a strange glint in his eyes...

◇Calgosi Coast◇

“I’m back here again... How many times has it been?” The Dark One’s minion Phufun surveyed the familiar coastline with her arms folded. “It feels like it’s been years since Master Yuigarde vanished from the Dark Citadel...and I’ve been searching all this time. But now, my intuition is telling me that he is somewhere on the Calgosi Coast!”

A bearded man with white hair and a small-bodied woman watched Phufun from a distance. “Polseidon...” the woman said. “That woman... She stood in the exact same spot delivering a very similar speech just a week ago, right?”

“So she was!” the man answered. “That woman shows up two or three times a month to yell at the ocean for a bit.”

“What do we do? Should we tell Countess Van Biel?”

“Hmm...” Polseidon ruminated. “I do sense the presence of a demon about her, but... Well, this is hardly the first time she’s shown up, and she’s never done anything particularly evil...”

“So we should just keep an eye on her for a bit longer then, right?”

“Yes, I think that would be best.” Both nodded. The two worked for Junia Van Biel, the countess who governed the Calgosi Coast.

Just then, a dire crow flew from the sky and landed in front of Phufun. “You!” she said. “You’re Calsi’im’s familiar—the skeleton I asked to be Dark Regent!” She pressed her glasses up against the bridge of her nose and took another look.

The crow cawed, in a tone that almost sounded like the word “Moron!” It pointed with its wing off to the north.

“Hmph. So you’re telling me you think the Dark One is in the north?” Phufun pressed her glasses up again. “No, I will choose to trust my intuition! Master, your Phufun is coming to you!”

Phufun ran off along the coast. The dire crow flapped its wings and flew after her as fast as it could, catching hold of her hair with its beak. But there was no stopping Phufun.

“Looks like she’s off running, right?” said Rolindeim.

“So she is...” Polseidon replied. “Looks like she intends to keep us busy!”

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair◇

“Kachoo!” Dawkson hastily covered his nose as he was overcome by a loud sneeze. “The hells was that? Someone gossiping about me...?” He had been sitting atop a boulder, looking up at the starry night sky with a wistful look on his face.

“Still can’t sleep, Dawkson?” Hero Gold-Hair stepped out of the forest. The party had been camping by the base of a nearby great tree.

“Oh, Blondie,” said Dawkson. “I dunno. Just got a lot on my mind...”

“I see. Well, you can always come talk to me, you know,” Hero Gold-Hair offered.

“I feel kinda bad making you spend your time on me...” Dawkson said, wincing awkwardly as Hero Gold-Hair sat down facing him. “I’ve told you before that I have a half brother, right? Well, my brother’s gotten married, and now, he has a

couple kids...”

“Oh! Well, that sounds like good news!”

“Well...I can’t tell you the details, but my brother had a really, really important job, and I drove him away...” Dawkson sighed heavily. “And, well, you know. I took over, thinking I could do a better job than he, but then I messed up everything I tried to do! Everyone started to hate me! So I ran away...”

Dawkson once went by the name Yuigarde, and the older brother he’d mentioned was none other than the Dark One Ghol from whom he’d wrested the throne. But Yuigarde had been arrogant and despotic, and resolved all of his problems with brute force. Demons, fed up with Yuigarde, started leaving the Dark Army or rising up in rebellion. Eventually, their disapproval got to him, and Yuigarde had abandoned the throne, leaving it empty. He changed his name to Dawkson and began traveling with Hero Gold-Hair, whom he met by chance.

“But while we were traveling together, Blondie, I realized something...” Dawkson said. “That I don’t know what I’m doing. That I’m not a replacement for my brother. Hah. I was just an idiot back then, and now, he has children, and all these folks giving him their blessing. It’s just too much sometimes, y’know?” he grimaced with self-deprecation and shook his head.

“Hm.” Hero Gold-Hair nodded. “Well, I won’t ask you to tell me the details if you don’t want to. But just learning that you don’t know what you’re doing is valuable in itself, isn’t it? Seems like it was worth running away for.”

“Does it...?”

“If you had stayed where you were, you might have become set in your ways. You might never have realized that you didn’t know what you were doing. Or worse, you might have ruined everything and been driven away for that! But we’ve gone on this journey together, and you’ve learned how much you still have to learn. You won’t make the same mistakes again, I think.”

“Blondie...”

“Well, all I can promise you is this.” Hero Gold-Hair looked Dawkson straight in the eyes. “Whatever happened in your past, you are still my precious companion.”

“Blondie...” Dawkson met Hero Gold-Hair’s gaze. “Thanks.”

The two sat there for a while, chatting and gazing at the starry sky.

Chapter 4: Flio Goes to the Mountains (Again)

◇The Alips Mountains◇

The Alips Mountains lay far to the north of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. Today, Flio's family was there, in the middle of the range.

"It's been far too long since we last visited this place!" Rys said, a look of pure delight in her eyes as she watched the white snow pile up, her lupine tail wagging furiously. She wasn't wearing her usual dress, but warm winter clothing. It looked very cute on her.

"Gare-Gare, look! Snow! Snow!" Wyne, wearing no more clothing than she usually did, pointed at the snowy mountains, a big grin on her face.

Garyl was grinning too. "Wow! This is amazing! *All* of this white stuff is snow?"

Elinàsze, dressed in a cute poncho-like outfit, smiled brightly as she clung to Flio's arm. "Let's have lots of fun, papa! We came all this way, after all!"

Flio looked around cheerfully at everyone who had come with him to the mountains for vacation. As thanks for preventing the Calamity Wurm from doing any harm to the land, the Maiden Queen had given them permission to stay at the royal resort spa in the Alips mountain range. The Magical Kingdom of Klyrode would pay for all expenses, she'd said, although the truth was that the Maiden Queen was paying it herself out of her own personal savings.

The party had just arrived using Teleportation. Everyone was there, except for Blossom, who was busy managing the farm, Belano, who had a class to teach, and Tanya and Minilio, who were keeping the Fli-o'-Rys General Store up and running.

"So *this* is snow!" cried Rislei, her eyes sparkling as she looked out at the slope. "This looks kinda fun!" Rislei was part lichsteed. Her horse tail was out like Rys's was, swishing happily.

As she stood there, her father Sleip sneaked up from behind and lifted her up

in the air. “Ha ha ha!” he laughed, shaking the girl from side to side. “Just let your papa show you how fun snow can be, my lovely Rislei!”

Byleri watched the two with a smile on her face. “Oh my gosh! Like, you totally love spoiling Rislei, don’t you, Lord Sleip?”

“M-Mama!” Rislei cried. “P-Please don’t say that... You’re embarrassing me! Let me down!”

“Like, really?” said Byleri. “But I totally know what you’re thinking. ‘It’s a bit embarrassing, but it’s kinda fun,’ right? Are you, like, totally sure you wanna stop?”

Rislei twitched. *Mama!* she thought. *She’s always doing that... How can she read me so well?*

In the end, Rislei allowed Sleip to wave her around a little while longer.

Ghozal folded his arms and looked up at the snowy mountains. “The first time I came here, I thought, ‘What’s so fun about playing in the cold and snow?!’ But when I tried it, I had a pretty good time!”

The mountains were dotted with a number of lodges. In front of the buildings was a slope where a crowd of humans and demihumans were zooming down the mountains with long boards attached to their feet. They were playing a game called “skiing.” Some people were also riding down the slope on a vehicle known as a “sled,” while others were throwing snowballs at each other. There were far more people here than last time, perhaps because of the newfound peace between the Magical Kingdom and the Dark Army. Everywhere they looked, they saw people crying out with delight.

“And this time,” Ghozal went on, “I’m here with my children...” Balirossa was walking beside him, holding their son Ghoros hand. She met her husband’s gaze and smiled. Ghozal smiled back, very happy. “Don’t you two think so, Uliminas and Folmina?” He turned the other way to where his other wife was standing.

But Uliminas and Folmina said not a word. Rather, they seemed to be completely unable to respond. The pair of them were covered from head to toe in an extraordinary number of layers of clothing, to the point that they looked

like nothing less than a pair of round snowmen, completely immobile. Their faces were wrapped up with heavy scarves. Ghozal could see their mouths moving, but the layers of scarves made their words inaudible.

“I knew Uliminas couldn’t handle the cold...” Ghozal said. “I guess you’re the same, huh, Folmina?”

Folmina nodded.

Uliminas was a hellcat demon. Cold was one of her biggest weak points. She had dressed this way the last time they’d come here as well. Her daughter Folmina had inherited her hellcat blood, and like her mother, she had an elemental weakness to cold.

Uliminas and Folmina were mumbling to each other, apparently able to understand what the other was saying.

“When it’s this snowy, I just wanna curl up under a nice warm blanket...”

“Me too, mama Uliminas...”

Ghozal smacked Uliminas affably on the shoulder. “Look at you! You can’t even walk wearing that much clothing! Well, let’s get you to the spa. You can warm up inside.”

But his smack proved too hard. Uliminas lost her balance and fell forward, rolling at a high speed down the slope. “Mreow!” she screamed as she rolled along. “I knew it! It’s happening agaaaiin!”

Ghozal laughed as he watched her roll along. “That’s right! You went rolling last time too! Looks fun!”

Flio noticed what was happening. “No, Ghozal!” he cried, flying quickly down the slope after the tumbling hellcat. “She’s falling! Just like last time!”

Folmina had been watching the scene play out next to Ghozal. Suddenly, she gave her father a big push from behind.

“H-Hrm?!” Ghozal cried.

Folmina was still a child, but with both hellcat and demonic royal blood in her veins, she had a considerable amount of strength. Ghozal, too, went tumbling down the slope, fast enough that he caught up with Uliminas in no time.

Folmina watched with delight as Ghozal gathered snow on the slope until he looked like a snowman himself. “I hate falling, but I love watching things fall!” she said, joy evident in her tone.

◇Alips Ski Slopes—Health Spa◇

The royal resort spa was a single-story building set a level above the other ski slopes on the mountain, as if the whole area around it was its own private slope. It was just like they remembered it from last time—a single large open room for the whole household to relax in, with a number of small private rooms around the central one. It was set up for them to have meals together in the large central room and then go off to the individual rooms to rest. There was also a veranda with a hot spring on top of a large indoor bath.

“I-I almost died!” Uliminas, who had been rescued safely by Flio, ran straight for the fireplace in the central room, desperately trying to warm her frozen body.

Ghozal and Folmina settled in cheerfully beside her. “You seem like you enjoyed yourself, Folmina!” said Ghozal, folding his arms and grinning.

“I did!” Folmina grinned back, pressing close to her mother to help warm her up.

During the incident, Folmina had found the sight of her mother rolling down the mountain hilarious. “Wow, papa Ghozal!” she had said, “I wanna see *more* people roll down the mountain!”

Ghozal couldn’t resist his daughter when she was in such high spirits. “All right, Folmina! Watch this!” he had said, and immediately began rolling down the slope again and again.

The other people on the mountain stared at him and whispered to each other. “What is that person *doing*?”

“You know, I think I saw someone else doing that earlier...”

Ghozal paid them no mind and kept rolling and rolling.

He's so childish sometimes... Uliminas thought as she looked over at her husband, not moving an inch from the fireplace. She smiled. *He's like a big kid. But he sure is doing his best fur Folmina...*

Folmina was pressed close, and by her side was Ghozal, folding his arms and laughing. Uliminas's teeth chattered from the cold as the fireplace gradually warmed her body. Then, Sleip, who had just made it inside, came up to her, his daughter Rislei riding on his shoulders. "Hey, Uliminas! If you're so cold, why not go in the hot spring? It's right out on the veranda."

Only Uliminas's eyes turned to look at Sleip. "I'll get in the bath if mew bring the bath here," she said, and pressed even closer to the fireplace. *Hang on...* she thought. *Didn't something like this happen last time? And then...* Her eyes snapped open. She looked over and saw Ghozal reaching out for her. Before she knew it, he had grabbed her.

"You can be difficult sometimes, you know," he said, effortlessly peeling her away from the fireplace with a single arm and picking her up. "Let's get you in the bath." He began taking off her layers of clothes.

"Mrow! W-Wait! It's cold! It's *cold*! And why are mew stripping me in front of *everymeown*?!"

"You can't take a bath with all these clothes on."

"Rawr! S-Stop!" Uliminas struggled for all she was worth, but it was in vain. In just a minute, the clothing she had been wearing was on the floor, leaving her stark naked. Stripping off his own clothing as well, Ghozal proceeded to the veranda. "N-Now I'll never get meowrried..." she wailed, her face bright red as she covered her breasts with her hands.

"What are you talking about?" asked Ghozal. "You're already my wife." He brought her into the hot springs with him. Uliminas immediately sank down to her shoulders in the water. "Hrm. It's good water. How about it? Folmina, Ghoros, Balirossa, wanna get in with us?"

"Are hot springs hot...?" asked Folmina.

"Yeah, Folmina. They're super hot," Ghozal answered.

"Then I'm getting in!" Folmina's face lit up and she tossed off her clothes as

she ran into the water.



“If Folmina’s getting in, I will too...” Ghoros followed suit, taking off his clothes.

Balirossa’s face turned red as she watched. “W-Well, I mean... I suppose, I... I mean...!” she stammered in a falsetto, frantically waving her hands.

Uliminas looked over, slowly lifting her face from the water where it had been submerged. “We’re wives of the same meow, mew know,” she said. “Don’t leave me in here alone!” She waved for Balirossa to come over.

“Th-That’s true...” Balirossa admitted. “O-Okay! Just...don’t stare at me, please...” Resigned to her fate and blushing furiously, Balirossa went out on the veranda and took off her clothes outside before getting in the hot spring.

And so, all of Ghozal’s family came to occupy the veranda.

Flio smiled at the sound of Ghozal’s family enjoying themselves. “Sleip,” he said. “There’s another family bath separate from the outdoors hot spring. We have the whole building to ourselves today, including the bath. Would you care to bathe with us?”

Sleip nodded eagerly. “Good idea! Since you asked so nicely, I suppose we’ll have to join you for a bath!”

Rislei turned bright red. “Eeeh?! Me too, papa?”

“Why not, Rislei? It’s been a while since I washed your back! Ah ha ha!”

“N-No thank you. I’m too embarrassed...”

“Don’t say that! Come on! Strike while the iron’s hot!”

“W-Wait! Papa!”

Sleip headed off towards the bath, carrying Rislei on his shoulders. Byleri followed along, taking a change of clothes with her.

“Papa, may we go too?” Elinàsze asked, taking Flio’s hand.

“Dada! Bath! Bath!” cried Wyne, taking Flio’s other hand, but...

“W-Wyne!” Flio scolded her, stopping the girl from taking off her poncho-style coat. “Don’t take off your clothes until we get to the bathroom!”

“Aww... All right. I’ll wait! I’ll wait!” Wyne fixed her clothes and once again

took Flio's hand. Rys followed behind, carrying changes of clothing for everyone.

"Hey, dad," said Garyl. "Can Sybe come in the bath with us?"

"I don't see why not!" Flio responded with a smile. "Sybe's clean, after all."

"Yay! Come on, Sybe!" Sybe, who was in its unicorn rabbit form, snuffled happily in Garyl's arms.

And so, Flio's and Sleip's families went to the bath together, leaving Ghozal and his family in the hot springs.



"First again!" Wyne cried, throwing off her clothes the moment she arrived in the changing area. She dashed straight to the bath and leapt in with a big *splash*, sending a spray of water into the air and submerging herself beneath the surface. Then, with a great "*Pfwaaaaah!*" she leapt from the water. Her wings, legs, and arms were all spread out as far as they could as she rose higher and higher, and then, with another mighty *splash*, she fell back into the hot bath. It looked like she was having a blast.

"Me too! Me too!" Garyl ran out after Wyne, only to suddenly grind to a halt an inch away from the water. "W-Wait! No! I need to rinse myself off first!" He scooped a bucketful of water from the bath and poured it over his body.

Wyne came swimming up to Garyl. "You're a good boy, aren't you, Gare-Gare!"

"Thank you for saying so, big sis Wyne..." Garyl said. "But you were supposed to rinse yourself off too, you know..."

"Ehe hee!" Wyne stuck out her tongue and gave Garyl a great big hug. "I'll do it next time!"

Wyne was a dragon who had lost her parents at an early age. Since she was young, she had spent her life as the young vanguard of the Dark Army's most elite division. She had grown up never knowing a family until Flio and Rys had taken her in and raised her as their own child. They loved her dearly, and she'd become very attached to them. And once Elinàsze and Garyl were born, she

took to doting adoringly on her younger siblings.

“Hey, hey, Gare-Gare!” she said.

“What? What is it, big sis Wyne?”

“Gare-Gare, do you like Eli-Li? Do you like her?”

“Eli-Li?” Garyl asked. “You mean our sister, Elinàsze? Of course! I love her a lot!”

“Uh-uh! Not her! You know! The lady with the nice long hair who always has dark circles under her eyes...”

“Dark circles...? Oh! You mean Miss Ellie?!”

The Maiden Queen, who sometimes went by Ellie, worked long and hard every day and never got enough sleep. As a result, she always had dark circles under her eyes. She usually covered it up using makeup, but such means couldn’t fool Wyne and Garyl.

“But...” Garyl said, his voice getting higher in pitch as his face turned bright red. “Wh-Why are you asking that all of a sudden?”

“Ha ha ha!” Wyne gave a big toothy grin. “I like Eli-Li! You’re cute together! Cute! You should have babies!”

“Wah?! B-Babies!” Garyl’s face got even redder. “B-Big sis Wyne, it’s *much* too soon for that!”

Flio was watching the two from a short distance away. “Garyl’s children...” he said. “He’s grown up quite a bit. It might not be all that far off...”

Rys nuzzled up against her husband in the bath. “And then you will be a grandpa and I will be a grandma.”

“Somehow, I can’t imagine it. Being a grandpa and grandma...” Flio looked over at his wife, his gaze accidentally falling on her shapely breasts poking out of the bathwater.

“Me neither...” said Rys, smiling and wrapping her arms around Flio’s arm. “But you know, I’m not done having children with my lord husband either...”

Flio felt Rys’s chest pressing against his arm. His cheeks flushed. But right as

things were getting a bit steamy between them, Sleip entered the bath next to them with a splash.

“Ha ha ha! I can’t believe I’m taking a bath with our fearless little tomboy and her husband! I suppose I really must be getting old...”

“I’ve told you time and time again... Would you please not talk about those days?” Rys said, pursing her lips and glaring at Sleip for daring to ruin the mood.

“Don’t be like that, Rys! We have the former Dark One, Mister Ghozal, and his confederate Uliminas, and of course, me of the Infernal Four here! Not to mention you, the one they used to call the fifth Infernal... I know things are complicated, but it must be some kind of mysterious connection that led to us all coming together again under Mister Flio after we left the Dark Army. Don’t you think so?”

“Well, I suppose I can’t refute that...” Rys nodded, and once again wrapped her arms around her husband. Flio just gave the two his usual easygoing smile.

Just then, Wyne came swimming up. “Dada! Let me wash your back!”

“Oh, no thank you, Wyne. I can do it myself.”

“Come on! Come on! You too, mama!”

“Oh? Me too?”

Wyne grabbed both Flio and Rys by the hand and pulled them out to the washing area, where the two sat down on wooden stools while Wyne washed them forcefully with a washcloth in each hand. “Scrub! Scrub!” she chanted as she washed their backs.

“Oh!” Elinàsze looked up from her conversation with Rislei and hurried over. “No fair, big sis Wyne! Let me help!”

“I’ll wash mama’s back!” said Wyne.

“Okay, then I’ll wash papa’s!” Elinàsze took one of the washcloths from Wyne and set to washing Flio’s back, cheerfully crying, “Scrub! Scrub!” in time with Wyne. Before long, they were both in the swing of it. Flio smiled as Elinàsze washed his back.

Rys laughed. “It seems I won’t be able to wash your back again this time, my

lord husband.”

“Ah well,” said Flio. “This isn’t so bad.”

Then, Garyl came running over. “All right! Then I’ll wash dad’s hair!”

“W-Wait, Garyl!” Flio protested. “I really would rather do that myself...”

“It’s okay! Let me!” Garyl said, massaging a generous portion of shampoo into Flio’s scalp. It was far too much, and before long, Flio’s hair was lost in a sea of bubbles.

Flio cast a defensive spell to prevent the shampoo from getting in his eyes, grimacing. *Come to think of it, didn’t this happen last time too...?*

Sleip stared at Flio’s family as the scene played out and then turned slowly back to look at Rislei. Until a minute ago, she had been chatting with Elinàsze in the bath, but now, she was beside her mother Byleri. She was nearly submerged in the water, as if she were hiding from him.

Sleip drew closer to Rislei. “Riiisleiii... Do you want to wash each other’s backs too?”

“N-No, I don’t... I’m much too embarrassed...”

“Come on! All the kids have been taking baths together at the house recently... I’ve been lonely! Can’t we do this together from time to time?” He lifted Rislei onto his shoulders and carried her to the washing area.

“F-Fwah?! I-I told you *not* to pick me up in the bath!” Rislei exclaimed. “Wh-What are you doing, papa? Put me down! This is so embarrassing!”

Sleip paid no heed to Rislei’s pleas, but carried her over to a wooden stool in the washing area. “Now, Rislei! I will wash your back!”

“S-Stop! I’m telling you! I can wash my own back!”

“Ha ha ha! Don’t be like that!”

Rislei felt like she could die of embarrassment as her father grabbed a washcloth and began happily scrubbing her back.

“Rislei...” Sleip whispered. “Thank you for being born...” The words made Rislei’s face turn even redder.

Papa...! she thought. *I can't be mad at him when he says things like that...* She sat there, bright red, as Sleip washed her back. Byleri watched the two with a smile on her face.



That night, after dinner, Flio and the others had fallen asleep in the main room. Suddenly, Flio's eyes opened. Careful not to wake the others, he stood and headed outside into the snow. *What's this?* he thought. *Something with a lot of magic power is moving around in the mountains...*

Flio kept his Search spell active at all times, as did Ghozal, Hiya, and Damalynas.

I don't think it's from this world, whatever it is... It's hiding its presence very well too...

Flio flew into the sky, casting defensive spells as he did. He was headed towards a nearby forest when he heard a rattling sound. It was faint, but it sounded like the clack of bones. Casting Concealment on himself, Flio flew in the direction of the sound.

"Huh?" he exclaimed. Before his eyes, he saw something very strange. A skelemonic creature was looking around the forest. It seemed to be searching for something. *That thing looks like a skeleton. I don't think it's from this world. If anything, it reminds me of Tanya when she was in that half-human, half-skeleton form...*

No sooner had he thought that than Tanya herself appeared, flying up to him with a look of surprise on her face. "Master Flio...?"

"Tanya? Did you sense something here too?"

"Yes, that is precisely correct..."

"By the way," Flio asked. "Do you know what that is?"

"My memories are still fragmented, thanks to my amnesia..." Tanya said. "But I think I remember that somehow. That is a skull ape from the Celestial Plane."

"A skull ape?"

"Yes. They are a type of familiar used by the angels of the Celestial Plane.

Their bodies are made of sturdy bone. They have no minds of their own, but if you give them orders using the Command spell, they will execute them with perfect obedience.”

“I see...” said Flio. “I wonder what sort of orders this skull ape is under...”

“Well,” said Tanya, “it looks like it’s found what it’s looking for.”

“Hm?” Flio cocked his head, puzzled. While he had been talking with Tanya, the skull ape had turned its head to look directly at him and began to move in his direction. “Huh? The skull ape’s coming towards us!”

Flio held out his hand and conjured a magic circle. He cast Gravitation, sending the skull ape falling into the snow. Held in place by Flio’s magic, it lay there unmoving as the snow piled up on top of it.

Tanya clapped her hands. “Splendid, Master Flio!” she said. “Skull apes may appear to be mere skeletons, but they are much stronger than they look. Even if their body is torn in half, they will continue to carry out their orders. They are durable and persistent. It is quite a feat to fully immobilize one like that.”

“Oh? I-Is it?” Flio asked, surprised. He watched as Tanya stepped up to the skull ape.

“I don’t know its objective, but it seems to be after you, Master Flio. Shall I destroy it?” She held out her arm, conjuring a large scythe. But before she could swing it, Flio stopped her.

“Tanya, hang on a moment.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“I’m just wondering... Is there any way to undo a skull ape’s commands?”

“Undo its commands?”

“Yeah. When I captured the Calamity Wyrms, I got all kinds of materials from it that let me make weapons and potions I’d struggle to create with only ingredients from this world. I was wondering if I might be able to use the skull ape for anything too...”

“I see. I suppose an order might be overwritten if someone else’s consciousness were to enter the skull ape, assuming that it is only under the

influence of an ordinary Command spell...” She shouldered her scythe and placed her hand on the skull ape’s head. “Indeed. It does seem to only be under the spell Command.”

Tanya muttered a short spell, and the skull ape’s head began to shine. After a brief moment, the light went out. Then, letters appeared above the skull ape, reading “Command Erased,” before those, too, vanished. “Now the skull ape should be immobilized. It should be safe to release your Gravitation spell.”

Flio dispelled his magic. True to Tanya’s words, the skull ape continued to lie immobile where it had fallen. Flio put the skull ape in his Bottomless Bag. “I wonder, could they cast Command on this thing while they’re somewhere far away?”

“It’s not impossible,” said Tanya. “But as long as it is within your Bottomless Bag, magic should have no effect. I don’t foresee it being a problem.”

“I see. Well, I’ll just have to put up an antimagic field when I’m working with it. That shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Yes, that should be sufficient.” Tanya nodded.

Flio checked to make sure the skull ape was safely inside his Bottomless Bag, and then took back to the skies. “All right, Tanya. I’m gonna head back to the spa.”

“Very good, Master Flio.” Tanya, too, took flight and left. Before long, snow had filled in the hole where the skull ape had fallen, until there was no sign it had ever been there.

◇Meanwhile, on the Alips Mountains◇

A group of women came to a stop amid the trees. “Wh-What is this? I no longer sense the skull ape!”

“What do you mean, you no longer sense it? Nobody in this world should be strong enough to destroy a skull ape.”

“And yet...it happened just after the Calamity Wyrms’ presence, weakened as it is, began to move...”

The women were taking the form of humans, but they were angels from the

Celestial Plane. Months ago, they had lost track of the Calamity Wyrms in the middle of transport, and had followed its trail to the world of Klyrode, only to find no trace of the thing. One of the angels had cast Command and given her skull ape the order, “Find the Calamity Wyrms.”

“We sent out the skull ape, since they can sense much fainter sources of magic power than we can...”

“But just when it finally detected a promising magic source, this happens...”

The angels put their heads together, deeply troubled expressions on their faces.

“W-Well, perhaps we should search the area where the skull ape vanished?”

“Yes. That may be our last remaining option.”

“Maybe we should report to the goddess that the Calamity Wyrms escaped...”

“Fool! If you do that, all of us will be stripped of our angelhood! We’ll be sent to the underground world Dogorogma!”

“D-Dogorogma...”

“That’s why we need to find the Calamity Wyrms no matter what! If we want to continue being angels of the Celestial Plane, it’s our only option.”

Their faces pale with fear, the angels set out to search the forest. Never in their wildest dreams did they imagine that Flio had long since exterminated the Calamity Wyrms...

◇The Following Morning—Alips Ski Slope◇

Flio and co finished their breakfast and hurried out to the ski slope early in the morning. “We’re going home tonight,” Flio said, “so let’s enjoy today to our hearts’ content.”

“Leave it to me, dada! I’ll enjoy it like you won’t believe!” Wyne raised her hand, grinning. She was wearing the usual dress she wore around the house and nothing else.

Uliminas, who was shivering despite once again being dressed in an absurd number of layers, glanced at the girl out of the corner of her eye. “Mrow...” she

moaned. “It’s so cooold... How can mew stand being dressed in a meowtfit like that...?”

Balirossa walked up to Uliminas, clearly worried. “Ser Uliminas... You could stay in the room where it’s warm if you prefer. You don’t have to force yourself to come out here with us. I can take responsibility for the children.”

“But we came meowll this way... And Folmina’s been having fun. I wanna see her like this, mew know? She’s been growing up so fast, after meowll...”

“I see...” Balirossa nodded. “I believe I understand your feelings very well.”

“What’s wrong?” Ghozal asked, walking over with a grin on his face. “You cold, Uliminas?”

Uliminas hissed and ran behind Balirossa, facing away from Ghozal. “The last time mew came up to me like that I ended up rolling down the meowntain! I won’t let it happen again!”

“Hrm?” Ghozal said. “But didn’t rolling down the mountain help you warm up?”

“Hissss! No! Stay back!”

Rys watched Ghozal and Uliminas argue with Balirossa awkwardly stuck in the middle. “Those two...” She sighed. “It looks like they’re quarreling again.”

“I guess it just means they’re close enough to fight!” Flio said, smirking.

Just then, they heard a cheerful voice calling out to them. “Good morning, my friends!” It was the Maiden Queen, disguised as “Ellie,” wearing an ordinary winter coat so nobody would realize who she was.

“Ah! Miss Ellie!” said Flio. “I’m glad you were able to make it!” He greeted the unexpected guest with a smile. Just last night he had received a message from the castle saying that Her Majesty the Maiden Queen was busy with official duties and would be unable to join them.

“It’s all thanks to you, Lord Flio,” Ellie said.

“Me?”

“Yes! That rainbow-colored potion you gave me eradicated my fatigue in an

instant! I used it last night and managed to finish all of my duties. It's phenomenally effective, that potion! It has been a long time since I felt so alive!" Ellie habitually worked herself to the bone and never got enough sleep. It was rare to see her without dark circles under her eyes. But the Ellie that stood before them now had smooth, glossy skin, with nary a discoloration.

Flio winced. *So she worked late into the night right after recovering from her fatigue...* he thought. *Won't she just exhaust herself again?* But the most he could manage to object was to say, "Well, I just hope you don't overexert yourself." He gave Ellie a cheerful smile.

"Oh! Ellie!" When Garyl noticed who Flio was talking to, he ran up, a smile on his face.

"Good morning, Garyl!" said Ellie.

"And good morning to you, Miss Ellie!" Garyl replied, putting on his best manners. "Will you be joining us today?"

"I am!" she said. "I finished my work early last night. There shouldn't be any problems with me being here."

"All right!" Garyl cheered, jumping up in the air. "Awesome!"

But even though Garyl was acting like a child, Ellie couldn't take her eyes off him. *G-Garyl really is growing up to be quite manly...* she thought, her face flushing red as she stared. *I hadn't noticed the last time I paid Lord Flio's house a visit, but he's almost as tall as I am now! And quite masculine too...*

"Miss Ellie? Miss Ellie?" Garyl repeated. Ellie returned to herself with a shock. She hadn't noticed Garyl had been speaking.

"A-Ah!" she cried in a shrill voice.

"Miss Ellie, are you okay? Your face is turning kinda red. Are you cold?" Garyl pressed his hands against Ellie's cheeks, a maneuver that brought his face perilously close to hers.

W-Waaah! Ellie thought. *G-Garyl's face is right in front of me!* The redness spread from her cheeks to her neck as she stammered out a reply. "I-I-I-I-I'm quite all right! Y-Yes, I'm perfectly warm!"

“I guess you are...” said Garyl, feeling the temperature of her face. “Okay! Why don’t you come play with everyone?”

“Ah! Yes, I’d love to!”

Garyl took Ellie’s hand and pulled her along to where Elinàsze and Wyne were waiting, waving at the two as they came over.

“Oh, Miss Ellie, please take care not to overexert yourself,” said Flio, a concerned expression on his face. “Our children can be a lot to handle sometimes...”

“Don’t worry!” Ellie said, a bright smile on her face. “I have *some* confidence in my stamina, you know.”

Is she really going to be okay? Flio worried as he watched her go.

“I wouldn’t concern yourself too much, my lord husband,” Rys said. “She has her knights with her, after all.” Indeed, as Ellie got dragged off, she was followed by a group of female knights led by Boralis.

Flio nodded, but somehow, he couldn’t shake his anxiety. “I hope you’re right.”



“Allow me to introduce my daughter,” Sleip said, addressing MacTaulo, who had come along with the Queen. “This is Rislei.”

Sleip, formerly of the Dark Army’s Infernal Four, and Knight Captain MacTaulo of the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode had clashed with each other in battle time and time again. Over the course of the war, they had grown to respect each other’s ability. After Sleip quit the Dark Army and came to live at Flio’s house, the two had become friends.

“A pleasure to meet you, Rislei!” said MacTaulo. “My name is MacTaulo. I’m a friend of your father’s.”

“Nice to meet you too, Mister MacTaulo.” Rislei bowed deeply.

“What a polite girl you are! And you look quite a bit like your mother Byleri, don’t you? Count your lucky stars you didn’t take after your father!”

“Ha ha ha! You’ve got that one right!” Sleip laughed loudly, scooping up Rislei and nuzzling his cheeks against hers. “I never thought I would be able to have a child at my age. I’d do anything for my precious Rislei.”

“You would, papa?” Rislei said. “If that’s so, then I have a request.”

“Oh? What is it, Rislei?”

“Could you please refrain from touching me so much? Especially when there are so many people around.” Rislei’s cheeks were flushed with embarrassment.

“Hmmm...” Sleip rubbed his neck. “Well, I know I said *anything*, but that one might be a little hard.”

“Come now, Sleip!” said MacTaulo. “There’s no need for that.”

“I can’t help it! Rislei is just too cute!” Sleip said, nuzzling Rislei’s cheeks once more. But he cut it a little shorter than usual this time, which Rislei greatly appreciated.

Half a day later, Wyne found Ellie sitting on the floor clutching her knees. “Eli-Li?” she asked. “You okay?”

In response, Ellie flopped back onto the snow, panting heavily, her arms and legs spread wide. She tried to tell Wyne she was okay, but she was unable to get the words out between ragged breaths. Ellie had joined in a snowball fight with Garyl, Elinàsze, and Wyne. At first, she had put up a good fight, but as time went on, her body felt more and more sluggish until she suddenly found herself unable to take a single step farther.

H-How did this happen...? she thought. *I was sure I could handle it...*

Just then, Garyl ran up to where Ellie was collapsed in the snow. “Are you all right, Miss Ellie? Here, I’ll take you to the lodge.” He picked her up in his arms, carrying her bridal-style.

W-Wait! What?! Ellie’s whole body turned red. “I can walk!” she started to say, but she was so happy to be in Garyl’s arms that she couldn’t get the words out. *I s-suppose this isn’t so bad,* she thought, her body perfectly still as her mind raced. *Sh-Should I wrap my arms around his shoulders? O-Or would that*

be too much...?

“Miss Ellie, are you okay?” Garyl asked innocently. He had no idea what Ellie was thinking. He kept asking if she was okay as he carried her along, careful not to shake her body too much.





Ellie rested for a while at the lodge. She took another dose of Flio's potion, which had her back on her feet in no time.

"That potion truly is incredible!" she marveled. "Not only is my fatigue completely gone, but I feel full of energy and power!" She looked at the freshly emptied bottle in her hand and sidled up to Flio, a serious look on her face. "Lord Flio, please do tell me when this potion is ready for sale. I am certain I would like to purchase quite a number of them..."

"Of course," Flio said. "We'll let you know as soon as they're ready. Although, you know, I still have a few doses from the testing phase."

"Please!" Ellie begged. "I would love to have them!"

Flio reached into his Bottomless Bag and took out enough potions to give Ellie an entire armful. "Oh, that's right," he said, handing another potion to Tanya, who was standing beside them. "Tanya, you're always so hard at work around the house and in the store. You should have one too."

"Such benevolence... You would give such a precious treasure to a humble maid?" Tanya bowed deeply and accepted the potion. She slipped it into her shirt, right into her cleavage.

"Er...Tanya?" Flio asked. "Wh-Where did you put that potion?"

"Ah," said Tanya. "This is the entrance to my extradimensional storage. You see?" She pulled her shirt down, giving Flio a direct look at her chest.

"I-I..." Flio stammered. "Well, that's fine, I suppose...but isn't it inconvenient to have the entrance in a place like that?"

"How so?" Tanya asked, blinking innocently. She seemed completely unconcerned with having just shown Flio and Ellie her naked chest. Flio, though, felt suddenly unsteady on his feet.



That evening, the household gathered with their luggage in hand.

"Everyone, make sure you haven't forgotten anything, okay?" said Flio.

“I have everything, papa!” Elinàsze responded.

“Me too!” said Garyl.

“I have everything too, dada!” chimed in Wyne.

They had enjoyed the snowy mountains until the sun had begun to set. Flio double-checked to make sure everyone was ready to go home and then turned to look at Ellie, who was standing in the entrance to the lodge.

“Thank you for setting this all up for us,” he said.

“It was no problem!” Ellie responded with serious earnestness. “It’s no exaggeration to say that the world was saved because of your actions. Truth be told, I feel you are owed a rather more spectacular reward than this.” *Not only did he defeat the legendary Calamity Wyrms for us, but he used it to create a truly spectacular potion...*

Garyl ran up as Flio and Ellie talked, smiling. “I had a lot of fun today, Miss Ellie!” he said, holding out his hand.

“I had a lot of fun too, Garyl!” said Ellie, smiling brightly, before shaking his hand.

Wyne ran up to them and pulled Garyl into a cheerful hug. “Ah ha ha!” she laughed. “I knew it! Gare-Gare likes Eli-Li! Gare-Gare likes Eli-Li!”

“Stop teasing me!” said Garyl, his cheeks turning red. “Miss Ellie is just really kind and beautiful, that’s all!”

“Eh?” Ellie froze stiff, her hand still extended. She hadn’t been expecting to be praised so suddenly.

“Well, Garyl, Wyne...” Flio said. “Shall we be off?”

“Okay-kay, dada!”

“All right. I’ll see you later, Ellie!”

The two stopped messing around and waved goodbye, running after Flio towards the Teleportation portal he had created.

Ellie, meanwhile, kept repeating Garyl’s words to herself in her mind. *I’m...kind and beautiful...?* she thought as the portal door closed, leaving her

alone with Boralis, MacTaulo, and the rest of her guards.

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair◇

Somewhere in the Alips Mountains, Dawkson hefted an enormous snowball with his entire body, hurling it with all his might. “Take that!” he bellowed.

“As if! I’m not about to lose to you!” Valentine leapt into the air and landed a flying kick on the snowball Dawkson had worked so hard to make. It split in two, landing on the ground below and almost hitting Hero Gold-Hair, who narrowly dodged it.

“Jeez!” Hero Gold-Hair exclaimed. “Valentine, I know it’s been a while since you’ve visited the mountains and you’re excited, but could you hold back a *little?*”

“Yaaaah!” Tsuya added. “You could have huuurt us!”

“Sorry! I’ll be careful!” said Valentine, not sounding particularly sorry. “All right, Dawkson! Next, I will ride on this plank of wood. You pull!”

“H-Hey!” Dawkson protested. “How come I gotta do all the hard work?!”

“Now, now, don’t say that! It’s been so long since I’ve been here! I want to have tons of fun!” Valentine got on her plank of wood, grinning like a child. She tossed out one of her dark threads for Dawkson to catch.

“Fine, fine...” Dawkson grumbled. “All right, I’ll pull. You hold on tight!”

“Okay!” Valentine replied cheerfully. Dawkson took the thread and began to run, pulling the makeshift sled along at astonishing speeds. “I’ve seen so much of the world with you all, but this is still the best part!” Valentine cheered. “I love sledding!” Her habitual seductive grin seemed quite out of place. Ever since they had reached the mountains, Valentine had been running around and acting like a child.

Valentine had come to the world of Klyrode from the Realm of Evil in order to destroy it. But after she learned how fun it was to play in the snow, she’d found she wanted to spend more time enjoying this world and had sealed off the passage between Klyrode and the Realm of Evil.

I’m glad I chose to live here... Valentine thought, crying out with childish

delight at the sensation of the cold wind on her face.

Hero Gold-Hair smiled as he watched. "She does seem to be having quite a bit of fun," he said. "I suppose it was worth it to bring her here."

"Yaaaah!" Tsuya agreed. "I'm having fun just waaatching her!"

Just then, Riliangiu approached at a run from the nearby forest. "Hero Gold-Hair..." she said. "Something's coming towards us."

"Oh?" Hero Gold-Hair looked in the direction Riliangiu had come from and saw a dire crow flying towards them.

"Huuuh?" Tsuya said, looking up with a curious expression on her face. "Is there something on that crow's baaack?"

The dire crow continued towards them, flapping its large wings. It gradually descended, eventually alighting in front of Dawkson.

"Y-You're...Phufun?" Dawkson said, furrowing his brow as a woman dismounted from the crow and keeled in front of him, her head bowed low.

"Master Yuigarde, the Dark One..." Phufun said. "I have been searching for you ever since you left. And at last, thanks to my keen intuition, I have found you..."

"*Caw—!*" the dire crow objected, pecking Phufun on the back of the head. "*Caw! Caw!*" It seemed to be saying, "*You would've spent your whole life looking if I hadn't brought you here!*"

"O-Ouch!" said Phufun. "That hurts! Yes, yes, you were the one who led me to them, but it was *my* intuition that told me to trust you, you see..."

"*Ca-caw! Caw—!*" the crow said, pecking her again. "*Stop taking credit! I'm the one who found him!*" it seemed to be saying.

"Wh-What are those two doing?" Hero Gold-Hair cocked his head.

"I'm not suuure..." said Tsuya, following suit.

Half an hour later, Phufun pressed her glasses up against the bridge of her nose and approached Dawkson. "Master," she said. "Please return with me to

the Dark Citadel.”

For some time, Dawkson was at a loss for words. Eventually, he pulled himself to his feet. “All right. I up and left in the middle of everything, didn’t I? Guess I gotta make good.”

“Th-Then...?”

“Yeah. I’ll come back.”

“Th-Thank you so much, Master!” Phufun bowed deep.

Dawkson turned to look at Hero Gold-Hair. “Blondie...” he said. “Thanks for looking out for me all this time.”

“What are you saying?” said Hero Gold-Hair. “You and I are still companions. This isn’t goodbye.”

“Blondie...” Dawkson did everything he could not to cry in front of Hero Gold-Hair. “All right. I guess I’m off.”

“Take care!” said Hero Gold-Hair.

And with that brief exchange, Dawkson took to the sky, flying after Phufun and the dire crow. They raced off at high speed, and before long they had vanished behind the clouds. Hero Gold-Hair, Tsuya, Valentine, and Riliangiu watched them go.

“Right,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “We should go too.”

“I wonder where they’re heaaaded...” said Tsuya.

“I don’t know,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “But I have a bad feeling about this...”

Hero Gold-Hair took off running in the direction Dawkson had vanished. The others hurried along after him.

Chapter 5: Hello Darkness, My Old Friend

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

One morning, as Flio’s household was finishing their breakfast, there came a knock on the front door, followed by a chorus of cheerful children’s voices crying, “Good morning!”

“Just a moment!” called Rys, who had been cleaning up after the morning meal. She headed towards the stairs to the second floor. “Elinàsze, Garyl, your friends are here!” she cried up the stairs. Then, she went back to open the door.

There were five children waiting outside: Salina, Irystiel, Leina Raina, Reptor, and Sadjitta—Elinàsze and Garyl’s classmates, who did everything together at school. Recently they had taken to coming to Elinàsze and Garyl’s house in the mornings to pick them up.

Rys smiled brightly at the group outside. “Thank you for coming to pick them up again!” she said. “They’ll be right out, so just wait one moment, please.”

Salina took a step forward, smiling and bowing. “Of course! We’re friends, after all! Stopping at our precious friends’ house on our way to school is only natural!” Irystiel interrupted, pushing her plush cat against Salina’s face. “Mrmph!”

“What do you mean *on our way to school*?” she said, speaking through the plush using ventriloquism. “Your house is on the opposite side of town! You’ve been going out of your way because you want to get on Garyl and his mother’s good sides! You’re trying far too hard, you know. Irystiel thinks so too.”

“Pshaw!” Salina pushed the plush cat off her face with all her might and brought her own face close to Irystiel’s. “Listen,” she said. “I’ll have you know that I am here simply as a *friend*. Nothing more, and nothing less. But if Lord Garyl’s mother takes a liking to me and decides that only I will do as a wife for her son, I suppose that is just the way of it. It isn’t my objective at all! Don’t try to confuse things!”

Sadjitta stepped up to the wide-eyed Salina. “H-Hold on, Salina! *I’m* your fiancé, aren’t I? Why do you care so much what Garyl’s mom thinks?”

“Pshaw!” This time Salina brought her face up close against Sadjitta’s. “Listen, Sadjitta. That thing our parents said about us being arranged to marry was just a verbal agreement. It isn’t so inflexible that we can’t marry another partner if we find someone we prefer when we’re of age! Or at least, that’s what I think.”

“B-But...” Sadjitta tried to get a word in edgewise, but Salina simply cut him off.

“Pshaw!”

“Sorry for the wait!” said Garyl, hurrying to the front entrance.

“Lord Garyl!” Salina looked at him with doe-eyed affection, propping her cheek in her hands. “Your Salina has come once more to bring you to school!” The irritable disposition she had taken with Irystiel and Sadjitta had vanished completely. Reptor and Leina smirked knowingly.

“Hello, everyone. Thank you for waiting!” Elinàsze, wearing a wide-brimmed hat that extended past her shoulders, stepped into the entryway after Garyl. Behind them were Flio and Wyne, as well as Sybe in its unicorn rabbit form.

“Hello, Salina, Irystiel, Leina Raina, Reptor, and Sadjitta,” said Flio, greeting each child individually. “Thank you all for coming to get Elinàsze and Garyl.”

Salina grinned dopily, her eyes sparkling with joy. She started mumbling to herself, lost in her own world. “Lord Garyl’s father knows my name! Lord Garyl’s father called me by my name! Lord Garyl’s father wants me to marry his son!”

“H-Hey!” said Sadjitta. “You don’t have to take it that far! And besides, *I’m* your fiancé!”

But Salina wasn’t listening.



“Papa! Mama! We’re off to school!”

“We’re off!”

Elinàsze and Garyl waved to Flio and the others in the doorway as they left for

school with their friends, smiles on their faces as they walked.

“Take care, all of you!” said Rys, waving back as she saw them off. Flio stood next to her, his usual easygoing smile on his face, waving as well.

“I’m glad they were able to make such good friends at school,” Flio said.

“Yes, me too,” said Rys. “I was worried because of how much faster they’re growing up compared to the other children. But it seems to have worked out.” She pressed close to her husband, smiling happily.

Flio looked between Rys and the children heading off to school. *Things have been peaceful ever since the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode and the Dark Army signed that treaty*, he thought as he waved them goodbye. *I hope it continues...*

◇Houghtow City—The Fli-o’-Rys General Store◇

The magic doll Tia stood in the Fli-o’-Rys General Store. Tia was the minion of Calsi’im, who had taken over as Dark Regent to replace the missing Dark One Yuigarde. She had come here to discuss the goods for sale in the Fli-o’-Rys Dark Citadel branch store, hoping to expand their inventory of foodstuffs and necessities used by the demons living in and nearby. The meeting was over, and now, she was engaged in a friendly conversation with Uliminas.

“School?” she asked, echoing Uliminas.

“Yeah!” said Uliminas. “My daughter Folmina and Balirossa’s son Ghorro are growing up purretty fast. Soon enough it’ll be time for them to take classes at the Houghtow College of Magic!” Uliminas was always level-headed when it came to business, but when she talked about the children, there was excitement in her voice.

Tia smiled. “How lovely. I suppose they’ll have a lot of fun...” She sighed quietly. “If only I weren’t a magic doll,” she lamented. “I wish I could bear Calsi’im’s children...”

Magic dolls were a type of living doll created by powerful magic users. They were known for having absolute obedience to their master’s commands, and needed a constant supply of mana in order to stay alive. Tia had once run out of mana and been discarded, only for Calsi’im to find her and restore her to working condition. She considered Calsi’im, who had saved her, to be her

master. Everything she did was for him.

“Mew know,” said Uliminas. “Flio’s able to make magic dolls. I wonder if he could help mew with that somemeow...”

“It would be impossible, I think, even for Lord Flio,” said Tia. “My body does not have that sort of functionality. There are records of such a thing being attempted, but I have not heard of even one example of a success...”

“I see...” said Uliminas. “So mew’ve already looked into it.”

“Yes. A little.”

Noticing that the mood of the conversation had become a little glum, Tia put a smile on her face. “Well, I suppose we’ve finished our meeting. I’m counting on your support regarding the Dark Citadel branch store, Lady Uliminas. Thank you very much.”

“Mew got it,” said Uliminas, shaking Tia’s hand. “I’ll let Flio know the details.”

Tia left the shop and got into a carriage waiting outside. Soon she was riding along back to the Dark Citadel.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

The Dark Regent Calsi’im sat as he always did, on a cloth spread out in front of the throne. Belianna, who was standing to his side, glanced over and furrowed her brow. “Hey, Dark Regent Calsi’im,” she said. “You might be just the damned regent, but you’re still in charge, aren’t you? How about sitting on that damned throne already? You’re the only one who thinks it’s an issue.”

“No, no, no, no, no!” objected Calsi’im. “I’m merely a representative of the Dark One, you know? They’d never have put me in charge if it weren’t an emergency. It would be presumptuous of me to sit on the throne!” He laughed, rattling his skull.

“You really are damned stubborn, Dark Regent...” Belianna clicked her tongue and adjusted the weight of the scythe she had slung over her shoulder. “But I guess that’s what makes you you!” She grinned.

Calsi’im glanced at her and nodded happily.

It had been several months since Calsi’im had been made the Dark Regent. At

first, the demons had balked at the idea of an ancient skeleton—so old he could die at any given moment—being made Dark Regent. Many of them had left in protest. And then, in order to quash the rebellion within his territory, Calsi'im had signed a peace treaty with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. By signing the treaty, he had secured the aid of the Wolf of Justice, a famous warrior and ally of the Magical Kingdom. With his help, Calsi'im's forces had defeated Zanzibar, the head of the largest rebel faction, and brought peace to the lands controlled by the Dark Army.

Calsi'im had been working hard with his minion Tia to reestablish a semblance of government for the Dark Citadel and crack down on small-scale conflicts between demons. He also had the help of Belianna, whom he had appointed Provisional Infernal, and the former rebel leader Zanzibar, who had been cooperating since his defeat.

At first, demons had hated his policy of using diplomacy and words to resolve conflicts rather than force. They said things like “It’s unbecoming of a Dark One! The Dark One is supposed to keep the peace using force!” or “He’s bringing disgrace to the station!” or “Go to hell, Calsi'im!”

But Calsi'im and his supporters were persistent, and as peace came to the land, the demons slowly changed their opinions.

“Doing things this way actually works pretty well.”

“So you can rule like that too, huh?”

“As long as he gets results, I don’t mind doing what he says.”

“That geezer’s actually doing pretty good. Who woulda thought!”

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room, Several Days Later◇

The Dark Regent Calsi'im sat as he always did, on a cloth spread out in front of the throne. Today, he was looking over a stack of paperwork.

“Excuse me, Tia,” he said. “Could I bother you for some tea?” He held out his hand, waiting for a teacup, but Tia was absent from her usual spot by his side. “Oh, that’s right! Tia still hasn’t gotten back from Houghtow City!” Embarrassed, he withdrew his arm. And then, he noticed something. “Hm...?”

Calsi'im stared at his hand. His bones were shockingly dry. Calsi'im poked his right hand with his left, and a bit of bone crumbled off and fell to the floor. *Hmm...* he thought. *Perhaps I've lived too long already...* He looked at the shards of bone on the floor and quietly sighed.

"Lord Calsi'im! I have news!" A skeleton warrior ran into the throne room, their bones rattling loudly.

"Oh? What is it?" Calsi'im looked up.

The skeleton stopped in place and bowed deeply. "My lord! The Dark One Yuigarde has returned!"

"Ah, at last..." Calsi'im came to his feet. But before he could take a step, Belianna burst into the throne room.

"Dark Regent Calsi'im, have you damned heard? The damned Dark One Yuigarde is back!" she shouted, not bothering to conceal the hostility in her voice.

Calsi'im just smiled and shook his head. "Now, now, little Belianna. I understand how you feel, but you need to show respect. I am merely a representative of the Dark One, ruling in his place until his return! I was always going to step down when the Dark One Yuigarde returned."

"Yeah...about that..." The Dark One Yuigarde, clothed in the Dark One's ceremonial attire, stepped into the throne room, followed by Phufun, as the dire crow flew in from behind and landed beside Calsi'im. Yuigarde came to a stop in front of Calsi'im, staring intently at the skeleton. And then, he knelt before him.

"L-Lord Yuigarde!" said Calsi'im, astonished to see Yuigarde acting like his own vassal. "What are you doing?!"

Yuigarde slowly lifted his head. "Calsi'im... You did a fine job with the Dark Army while I was away. I'm abdicating. In honor of your achievements, I want you to take the throne." So saying, he took the Dark One's armlet off his own arm and offered it to Calsi'im.

"Wh-Whaaaaa?!" Phufun, who had been following behind Yuigarde, did a double take. She pushed her glasses back up on the bridge of her nose. "M-

Master! Have you taken leave of your senses?! You mustn't say such things! Now, you need to take control of the Dark—"

"Nah," Yuigarde said, calmly cutting off his minion's frantic protests. "I thought about what I gotta do, and I figure I should give the throne to the best guy for the job. And that sure isn't me."

"N-No..." Phufun gasped, shocked still.

Calsi'im simply stared wordlessly as Yuigarde held out the armlet.

◇In a Forest Near the Dark Citadel◇

Before long, word that the Yuigarde had returned to the Dark Citadel had spread all throughout the area. Eventually, it reached even Doctor Mephisto, who folded his arms and stared out at the citadel from afar.

"Well!" he said. "I can only imagine that with the Dark One Yuigarde returned, the Dark Citadel must be in quite a state of confusion."

"Indeed..." The Shadow King was standing behind Doctor Mephisto, puffing on a cigar. "Then, shall we proceed with the plan to take over the Dark Citadel?" His lips curled up into a wicked sneer.

Doctor Mephisto nodded. "Our original plan was to eliminate the Dark Regent Calsi'im, thereby throwing the Dark Citadel into chaos and giving us an opportunity to infiltrate. But using the chaos of Yuigarde's return seems just as efficacious. Flexibility is of the highest importance when plotting treason, you know!"

"Indeed. You are not mistaken." The Shadow King snapped his fingers, signaling the fox sisters Kintsuno and Gintsuno to appear behind him, followed by a great host of demons, who had all transformed into the shapes of magic beasts.

"We've assembled our followers from all over the land!" Kintsuno yipped. "We're good and ready for the violence!"

"We're ready to go at any time!" yipped Gintsuno.

The fox sisters were powerful demons who had once ruled the demons of the west. They had risen up in rebellion against Yuigarde only to be met with

ignominious failure. Their surviving followers had scattered across the lands, lying in wait, until they had gathered together once again for this plan.

“I, too, am quite prepared.” Doctor Mephisto raised his arm, and an army of devils appeared from the forest behind him. He had been born to a prestigious devil family, and the demons he had summoned were his family’s private soldiers.

“Yes,” said the Shadow King. “And I have made preparations.” He snapped his fingers yet again, and a group of men appeared from the forest, armed to the teeth and dressed in black. The Shadow King had been engaged with the black market even back when he was the King of Klyrode. The men gathered here belonged to the Shadow Conglomerate—the secret organization he had created in order to dominate the underworld.

The Shadow King, Doctor Mephisto, and the demon fox sisters all nodded to each other and then turned as one to face the Dark Citadel.

“We shall attack as one!” declared the Shadow King.

“Everyone, after us!” yipped Kintsuno.

“This time, we will reach the top!” Gintsuno yipped in agreement.

“No need to hold back, my friends,” said Doctor Mephisto. “Give them everything you’ve got!”

The four took off towards the Dark Citadel. Following behind them were the various minions each of them had summoned. It was a grand force, advancing as one through the forest.

And then, the ground beneath the ringleaders’ feet suddenly gave way.

“Wh-Whaaa?!”

“Kyaaah!”

“Oh no! Oh no!”

“What is happeniiiiiiing?!”

They each cried out as they fell into a large hole that had appeared from nowhere. And then, one after another, their minions met a similar fate, each

plummeting down various fresh holes.

“What’s this?” said one of the soldiers who had not yet been trapped.
“Something’s happening ahead of us!”

“Everyone!” shouted another. “Scatter into the forest!” The ones who had managed to stay aboveground ran full tilt for the trees.

“Ohhh?” came a beguiling voice, as Valentine appeared to cut off their retreat. “Think you can escape *me*?” She shot dark thread out from her fingertips, pursuing the underlings as they desperately tried to escape. The threads stretched and stretched, catching up to Valentine’s retreating opponents to choke, stab, or bind them up so they couldn’t move.

“Wh-What’s with that woman?!”

“Never mind that! Just run!”

The remaining underlings, terrified, attempted to run as their allies fell one after the other around them.

“How unfortunate. I am afraid there is no escape.” Riliangiu came in pursuit, her arms past the elbows transformed into blades. She moved through the forest with incredible speed, dicing the opponents Valentine’s threads had missed into ribbons.

In the end, there were only two who had been lucky enough to escape...but then, they went plummeting into yet another hole.

“Waaah! Wh-Why would there be a hole here?!”

“H-Here tooooooo!”

Two figures watched the scene play out from atop a nearby hill. “I had a bad feeling about this whole thing, but I can hardly believe all these people got together just to meddle with Dawkson’s business!”

Hero Gold-Hair looked down at the forest, the shovel he had used to dig the pitfall traps slung over his shoulder. It was a legendary item—the Drilldozer Shovel, an artifact with the power to dig enormous holes in the blink of an eye. Hero Gold-Hair had originally stolen it from the sanctuary of Castle Klyrode. He had used its power to create innumerable scores of holes surrounding the

Shadow King's forces in every direction.

Tsuya peered out at the forest from beside Hero Gold-Hair, searching the best she could. "I don't thiiink I see any bad guys left."

"I see!" said Hero Gold-Hair. "Then let's wait for Valentine and Riliangiu, and then we can take our leave." He couldn't help but steal a glance at the Dark Citadel.

"Ummm..." Tsuya said, tugging on Hero Gold-Hair's arm. "Are you suuure we can't go visit Dawkson?"

"No need," he said, nodding. "Dawkson can handle this." The pair headed off towards the forest. "But more importantly, we should strip these goons for valuables before we leave!"

"Oh! Okaaay! I'll do my best!"

◇The Following Morning—Dark Citadel Throne Room◇

"Yuigarde said he would abdicate the throne to Calsi'im?!" Tia, who had only just returned from Houghtow City, clasped a hand over her mouth when she heard the news.

Belianna shifted the weight of the scythe on her shoulder. "Damned right," she said. "He showed up out of the damned blue, only to say *that*. He even gave him the Dark One's Armlet, the proof of the station."

"Goodness! Goodness gracious! Goodness gracious me!" Tia was well and truly at a loss for words. She looked over at the throne, where Calsi'im was sitting as he always did, on a cloth laid out in front of the throne itself. She walked over to him. "Calsi'im, what do you intend to do?" she asked, peering closely at his face. Calsi'im's head was hung. He seemed to be deep in thought. "Excuse me... Calsi'im?" Tia repeated, cocking her head curiously at his lack of response.

Suddenly, Calsi'im returned to himself and looked up. "Oh! If it isn't little Tia! My thanks for traveling all the way to Houghtow City!"

"It... It was nothing," Tia said. "But what about...?"

"Ah, yes." Calsi'im sighed heavily. "I do believe I know what you are trying to

say. I was certain that I could stop playing the Dark One when Lord Yuigarde returned. But now, I don't know *what* to do..."

Tia smiled. "Calsi'im, I believe that at times like this the best thing to do is drink a cup of tea and clear your mind. Overthinking things isn't going to help you come up with any good ideas."

Tia went to the side room and poured a cup of tea from the pot she had prepared, then returned and handed it to Calsi'im. "Tia..." he said. "Thank you for always looking after me..." Calsi'im brought the cup of tea to his lips, only for his arm to abruptly fall apart at the elbow; both the teacup and his arm clattered to the floor.

"C-Calsi'im!" Tia went pale. She scrambled to pick up Calsi'im's arm. She dabbed the joint with some of the healing potion they kept on hand for Calsi'im at all times and reattached it to his elbow. It stuck fast. Tia breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness for those potions from Fli-o'-Rys..." she said. "It seems that your arm is fixed."

Calsi'im patted Tia gently on the head. "Thank you for always looking after me, Tia," he repeated, an apologetic smile on his face.

"Seeing you well is all the thanks I need," said Tia.

This was far from the first time Calsi'im's arm had fallen off, but something was giving Tia a sense of unease. *The way his arm fell off...* she thought. *Is it just me, or is it somehow different from the previous times?*



Calsi'im sipped from the cup of tea Tia made. Everyone who had been in the throne room had left, leaving Calsi'im sitting alone. He stared at the arm that had fallen off earlier.

Hmm... he thought. *It looks all right for now, but it's absolutely covered in cracks. The insides have all worn away.* He raised the arm and lowered it, tea cup still in his hand. The repaired elbow joint rattled visibly, threatening to fall off once more.

"I believe it will soon be time for my last public appearance..." Calsi'im muttered to himself. Then, he raised his voice. "Good Sir Caw-lins, would you

come here for a moment?” His dire crow familiar flew in through a nearby window and landed in front of him. “My apologies, but could you deliver a letter for me? I will have it written up at once.”

Calsi'im took a pen and a piece of paper from his breast pocket...



The Dark One Yuigarde had announced his abdication in favor of Calsi'im, the Dark Regent. Before long, demons everywhere had heard the news, but hardly anyone took it at face value. Many suspected that it was a rehearsed ploy—the Dark One would pretend to abdicate, only for Calsi'im to refuse, thereby enabling Yuigarde to regain some measure of popularity. After all, the demons remaining in the Dark Citadel had stuck with Calsi'im through thick and thin, working hard together to rebuild it into something new. Most of them thought very little of Yuigarde, who had abandoned his throne. They weren't about to trust anything out of his mouth.

◇The Dark Citadel—Yuigarde's Private Quarters◇

Calsi'im had told Yuigarde to “*give him some time to think.*” Now, the current Dark One was sitting on his bed in his old room in the Dark Citadel, refusing visitors.

Phufun pressed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose, her face twitching with rage. “How could you have done such a thing?!” she demanded. Her subordinate, the mad scientist girl Coqueshtti, was with her, standing over Yuigarde. Those two—and within the Dark Citadel those two alone—constituted Yuigarde's supporters.

Yuigarde looked between the two. “I've already made up my mind,” he said, giving them a self-deprecating smile. “I ran away and left the throne empty. I've got no right to be the Dark One.”

Phufun brought her face up very close to Yuigarde's. “But Master!” she said. “Only *you* are worthy of dominating the Dark Citadel—to lead the Dark Army! I, your minion Phufun, know that better than anyone!”

“Yes! Yes!” Coqueshtti nodded. “I think so too!”

But Yuigarde just gave the two of them a look. “Yeah...” he said. “I thought

that too, once.” He sighed, slowly standing up from the bed. “But that Calsi’im got the Dark Army back on its feet while I was gone, even after that whole rebellion thing left it pretty much destroyed.”

“W-Well, I cannot deny that...” A troubled expression crossed Phufun’s face. “But even so...”

Yuigarde placed his hand on Phufun’s shoulder. “He did something I couldn’t. Nothing wrong with admitting that, is there?” Then, he walked over to the window. “Look,” he said, waving his hand out the window. “You see how popular I am? The great Dark One returns, and you two are the only ones who’re happy to see me back. Funny, right?” He laughed sarcastically at himself.

Phufun just kept staring at Yuigarde. “But... But even so, I...” She was at a loss for words, tears welling up in her eyes. Coqueshtti, too, looked like she might cry.

Yuigarde stepped up and gave the two a great big hug. “Thanks, you two,” he said. “Don’t worry. I’ll make things right.”

◇That Night—Dark Citadel Throne Room◇

Calsi’im was still sitting on his usual cloth when a magic circle suddenly appeared in the throne room. A portal shaped like an ordinary door emerged and opened to reveal Flio.

It took Calsi’im a moment to notice he had company, but then, he bowed his head deeply. “Oh, Mister Flio! I’m so dreadfully sorry to make you come all this way...”

“It’s not a problem,” Flio said. “I got your letter. But...isn’t teleporting directly into the throne room against the rules?”

The spell Teleportation allowed its caster to instantly travel to any location they had been to previously. Flio had been to the throne room before, so it was easy for him to teleport there any time. Flio, however, might have been the only one in the world strong enough to break through the manifold arcane defenses that prevented intrusion into the Dark Citadel.

“Yes, well, as I told you in my letter, this is a bit of an emergency situation. I

needed to see you immediately.” Calsi’im cleared his throat and looked up at Flio, a serious look on his bony face. “Now, in fact, I have invited you here today to beg a favor...”

“It depends on what it is, of course,” Flio said. “But you’re the one who signed the peace treaty with the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode. If there’s anything you need, I’d be happy to help.”

Calsi’im nodded and took a deep breath. “The truth is, I have something very important to discuss with the Dark One tomorrow. It’s a very delicate situation. Depending on what happens, the whole Dark Citadel might be thrown into chaos. I was very much hoping your friend the Wolf of Justice might be able to accompany me...”

“Ah. The Wolf of Justice, is it?”

“Yes. I would very much like the Wolf of Justice’s support for my position.”

“And by your position, you mean what you wrote in your letter?” Flio said, taking the letter out from the Bottomless Bag on his belt.

“Precisely. I believe that what I have to say might upset some people. Things might get rather chaotic. But the Wolf of Justice saved us from rebels. Even demons see him as a hero, you know? With the Wolf of Justice’s support, I’m sure I can make everyone understand.” Calsi’im bowed deeply. “Well? Will you kindly grant me your aid?”

Flio thought for a moment and then nodded. “All right,” he said. “I’ll pass the message along to the Wolf of Justice. Although I can’t promise he’ll agree with your thinking on this.”

The Wolf of Justice was a hero persona in a wolf mask Flio had constructed in order to help the Klyrode army when they had come under attack by demons without revealing his identity.

“Oh! Truly?! Thank you!” Calsi’im said, grinning happily. He gripped Flio’s hand tightly, thanking him over and over again.

Flio just smiled his usual easygoing smile.

◇The Following Morning—Dark Citadel Grand Hall◇

The next morning, the Grand Hall of the Dark Citadel was packed full, with not just the residents of the Dark Citadel itself but also demons who lived nearby. The Dark One Yuigarde and his minion Phufun sat before them on one side of the stage. On the other sat the Dark Regent Calsi'im and his own minion Tia. They were set up facing each other with a gap between them.

"What's going on? What's happening?" Coqueshtti looked up from the very first row, swallowing nervously as she watched. Beside her sat Belianna, who Calsi'im had made Provisional Infernal, as well as Zanzibar.

"Today's the day that damned Dark One Yuigarde's handing over the throne to Lord Calsi'im," answered Belianna.

"Indeed..." drawled Zanzibar. "Well, let us just watch and see what happens."

"Master..." said Phufun, who was sitting next to Yuigarde. She bashfully lowered her gaze. "I know many things have happened to bring us to this point. You should do what your heart tells you. Whatever happens, I will serve you always."

Yuigarde placed a hand on Phufun's shoulder. "Yeah," he said. "Thank you." Phufun squeezed his hand tight and then let it go. He surveyed the crowd before him and then raised his arm high. "Listen up you losers!" he bellowed. "We're doin' the abdication ceremony!"

The Grand Hall, which had been full of whispered conversations, fell dead silent. Before their eyes, Yuigarde removed the proof of his station—the Dark One's armlet—and slowly stepped up to Calsi'im. "In my name, Dark One Yuigarde, I acknowledge Calsi'im to be my successor. The Dark One's armlet is his." He knelt and held up the armlet before the ancient skeleton.

Calsi'im, dressed in his usual robe, stared intently at Yuigarde, not moving an inch.

"Excuse me... Calsi'im?" Tia whispered into his ear, worried about his strange silence.

"Yes, Tia," he whispered back. "I understand." Calsi'im slowly rose to his feet. And before everyone's eyes, he ever so slowly extended his hand. He took the

armlet. “I accept your abdication. I, Calsi’im, swear to serve as Dark One and guide our people well.”

The Grand Hall erupted into cheers. “Long live the Dark One!”

“Long live Lord Calsi’im!”

All over the room, people welcomed the new Dark One with great cheer, celebrating and wishing him well. Calsi’im raised both arms, and the room went silent. Tia took a deep bow before him, holding her left hand to her chest. “Calsi’im...” she said. “No, I should say *Dark One Calsi’im*. I, the magic doll Tia, swear ever deeper loyalty to you as your minion. I swear to you that I will perform with better and better service.”

Calsi’im nodded.

Yuigarde descended from the stage as the demons all cheered Calsi’im’s name. “Master Yuigarde...” Phufun said, pressing close to him, a complicated expression on her face. “You were fantastic...”

“I’m just glad it’s over, y’know?” said Yuigarde.

The two chatted on, their conversation drowned out by the noise of the hall.



The brand new Dark One Calsi’im stood before a host of demons celebrating his inauguration. “Now...” he said. “I realize this is sudden, but there is something I would like to confirm.” He looked out to gauge the crowd. Everyone went quiet, staring intently, not willing to miss a single word. “Do all of you swear loyalty to the new Dark One?”

Once again, the room was full of cheers. Voices of assent came from all over.

“Of course! Lord Calsi’im is the Dark One!”

“I will serve you even more dutifully than before!”

“Long live Dark One Calsi’im!”

“Long live Dark One Calsi’im!”

Tia, who was still kneeling before Calsi’im, smiled.

“And you too, Tia?” Calsi’im asked. “You swear your loyalty to the new Dark

One?”

“I have sworn eternal loyalty to you, Calsi’im,” she said, bowing deep. “Of course I will.”

Calsi’im nodded, satisfied, and looked back out at the crowd. “In that case, I hereby announce my abdication!”

Suddenly the Great Hall was full of chatter. “H-Hey... What did Dark One Calsi’im just say?”

“I think he said he was abdicating...”

“What?! But we just *had* an abdication!”

Tia, too, looked up at Calsi’im, shocked. “C-Calsi’im?” Calsi’im put his hand on her shoulder, only for it to crumble away, the bones clattering to the floor. “Calsi’im!” Frantic, Tia scrambled to pick up the parts of his arm, only for them to turn to dust in her hands and slip through her fingers. “What... What’s happening?!” she cried, doing her best to try to gather the fragments together in one place.

Calsi’im leaned in close. “Tia... It’s all right...” he whispered, patting her on the head with his remaining hand. “Thank you for everything...”

“C-Calsi’im...” Tia looked up pleading. “What are you trying to say?”

Calsi’im held her close with his remaining arm for a moment. “Now then,” he said, letting her go and walking off the stage and over to Yuigarde. He knelt deep, holding up the armlet. “In my name, Dark One Calsi’im, I acknowledge Dawkson—formerly Yuigarde—as my successor. The Dark One’s armlet is his.”

Dawkson. That was the name Yuigarde had adopted to conceal his identity when he gave up on being Dark One and left to travel the world and find himself. “Calsi’im...” he said, staring in shock. “You... You know I quit being Dark One, right? You can’t become Dark One again once you’ve stepped down.”

Calsi’im smiled cleverly. “Yes, one who has stepped down as Dark One may never again enter the Dark Citadel. But I don’t see why we should apply the same restriction to *Dawkson*! Besides, I have authorized it myself.” He held up the armlet again.

“No, I... I can’t...” Yuigarde shook his head, fending off the armlet with his outstretched palms. “Even if that’s true, I don’t gotta accept it! Besides, I’m not worthy of taking the throne from you.” But then, Yuigarde noticed something that gave him yet another shock. Before his very eyes, Calsi’im’s body had started crumbling to dust. It had already started piling up at his feet.

Calsi’im looked down at his body. “It’s the end of my life span, I’m afraid,” he said. “When we skeletons die, we turn to dust and return to the earth.” He laughed, his jawbone rattling noisily—only for it, too, to crumble to dust.

Calsi’im turned again to the assembled demons. “Everyone, you swore your loyalty to the new Dark One, you know? Please do your best to support the new Dark One, Dawkson...”

The hall erupted with noise.

“H-Hang on, Lord Calsi’im! *You’re* the one we swore our loyalty to!”

“W-Wait! Come to think of it, Lord Calsi’im only said we should swear to the *new Dark One!*”

“Don’t tell me... Did Lord Calsi’im do that so he could abdicate to Yuigarde under a different name?”

Calsi’im looked back at Yuigarde, turning his attention away from the crowd. “This is my final request, Lord Dawkson...” he said, pressing the armlet against Dawkson’s chest. “Become the new Dark One and lead demonkind to a brighter future...”

And with that, the last of Calsi’im’s body turned to dust.

Yuigarde watched in shock, holding the armlet. For a while, he didn’t move. And then, he bowed deeply, pressing his forehead to the floor. “I...” he said. “I still don’t know what I’m doing... But I swear I’ll do my best to live up to your expectations, Dark One Calsi’im. I’ll be your new Dark One.”

Bowing like that, he looked nothing at all like the former Dark One Yuigarde, who rumors said was ever so violent and despotic.



Tia watched, speechless, as the scene played out. She had no attention to pay

to Dawkson, only the pile of dust he was still bowing before. The pile of dust that had once been Calsi'im.

And then, slowly, she began to move. She covered her face with her hands. "Nooooooooo!!!" she wailed. "Calsi'iiiiim!!!" She ran towards the pile of dust and began desperately trying to gather it together. Nobody knew what to say.



The Great Hall had fallen into chaos.

"Wh-What does this mean? Lord Calsi'im...is dead?"

"And Dark One *Dawkson*? There's just no way..."

"Nobody's going to acknowledge him! No way!"

Angry shouts were flying from all directions. Some demons had even started to fight.

Belianna watched it all with an expression of disbelief on her face. "Hey, come on..." she said. "What the damned hells are we supposed to do now?!"

Zanzibar folded his arms and cocked his head. "Indeed... I am rather at a loss myself..."

Just then, a man appeared on the stage. He wore a blue wolf mask and a blue cape that fluttered in the breeze.

"Th-The Wolf of Justice!" Belianne, who was closest to the stage, cried out in delight when she saw who it was. She had fought him before, unable to land so much as a finger on him. Enthralled by his absolute power, she became enamored with him. Now, she was one of his biggest fans.

She wasn't the only one, though. Demons respected strength in their enemies as well as their allies. Many of them practically worshipped the Wolf of Justice.

The Wolf of Justice looked out at the crowd and spoke. "I came here at the request of Mister Calsi'im to lend my total support to his position."

That seemed to work.

"If the Wolf of Justice says so, I guess we have to go along with it..."

"Yeah... Can't say no when he has the support of the savior of the Dark

Citadel.”

“I suppose...if *he’s* the one saying it...”

The crowd settled down, acknowledging Dawkson as Dark One. The Great Hall was soon filled with applause.

The Wolf of Justice turned with a flourish of his cape and vanished.

A few demons noticed that someone else had vanished as well. “Huh? Where did Lady Tia go?”

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

A portal appeared in a room on the second story of the workshop behind Flio’s house. Flio stepped out, still dressed as the Wolf of Justice, carrying Tia in his arms.

“My lord husband, what happened?” Rys ran up to him as soon as he got back. She was wearing a single cloth wrapped around her body in case she needed to turn into her lupine form at a moment’s notice. She, Wyne, Hiya, Damalynas, and Tanya had all been waiting in that room after Flio departed for the Dark Citadel, just in case they were needed.

Tia was deliriously mumbling Calsi’im’s name over and over to herself. “Calsi’im... Calsi’im...” She was still clutching his dust in her arms.

Flio looked down at the doll in his arms, deep in thought. “I want to help Calsi’im, but I’m not sure how...” He opened the magic window and searched for the term “resurrection.” But he didn’t have much luck. “There’re spells to bring back people who died from an injury or accident, but I can’t find anything that can bring back someone who’s died of old age...” Still, he bit his lip and kept searching as he laid Tia down on the couch.

Suddenly, he heard a voice. “*Mister Flio...it’s all right...*”

“Calsi’im?!” Flio looked around for the source of the voice. He saw a small light hovering around Tia’s body. “Is that...Calsi’im’s mind?”

“Exalted One...” said Hiya, approaching Flio from the side. “You are correct. That is indeed Mister Calsi’im’s psychic body. However, Mister Calsi’im was originally a skeleton, a kind of demon lacking in magic power. Him surviving in

such a state at all is a miracle. No doubt his psychic body will dissipate soon...”

Tia stared intently at the small light dancing around her. “No!” she cried. “Please, Calsi’im...don’t go!”

Flio thought as hard as he could. *Psychic body...* he thought. *In that case...* He took something out of his Bottomless Bag—something that made Tanya look on in puzzlement.

“Master Flio...” she said. “What do you intend to do with that?”

It was the skull ape, a creature from the Celestial Plane, that Flio and Tanya had captured the other day in the Alips mountain range.

“If I recall correctly,” Flio said, “the skull ape was designed to receive mental magic. Do you think someone with a psychic body could possess one?”

“I suppose so...” Tina said. “But do you truly intend to put that skeleton’s psychic body inside a skull ape?”

“I don’t know how well it’ll work, but it’s worth a try!” Flio held up one hand towards the skull ape and the other towards Tia. The light flying around her had already mostly vanished. “Nhhh...” he murmured, focusing.

A magic circle appeared. It was a strange, complicated combination of multiple spells, difficult even for Flio. It absorbed the ball of light and then settled around the skull ape’s head. But then, the magic circle violently sprang out, Calsi’im’s psychic body with it.

“It rejected him?!” Flio said. “Dang it... All right, again!” He brought the magic circle back to the skull ape’s head. For a moment, it looked like it was going to spring away again, but Flio held it in place with force. He was using all his power to try to force the magic circle into the skull ape. “Nghhh...”

Finally, it went inside. The skull ape shone with light and shrank before their eyes until it was the same size as Calsi’im.

“I don’t believe it...” Hiya’s eyes, usually only visible as slits, were opened wide as they watched. “Did Calsi’im’s psychic body truly manage to possess the skull ape?”

“I don’t know...” Flio said. “But I did everything I could...” He staggered,

unsteady on his feet.

“My lord husband!”

“Dada! Are you okay?! Are you?!”

Rys and Wyne hurried to Flio, catching him from either side before he could collapse.

“I-I’m all right...” Flio said. “I just used a bit too much magic, I think...”

Tia ran up to the skull ape and immediately began calling to it. “Calsi’im! Calsi’im!” But the skull ape remained unmoving.

◇Meanwhile—In the Sky◇

“This is where you detected the skull ape?”

“Yes. There is no mistaking it. I believe it is on the second floor of that building behind the main house.”

Two figures were flying in the sky above Flio’s house. Their bodies were half-young women and half-skeleton, and they were dressed in ragged cloaks and carried scythes. They seemed prepared for a fight.

“Right,” said the apparent leader. “Let’s recapture the skull ape and recommence our search for the Calamity Wyrms.”

“By your command!” The other bowed and made to descend.

But before the angels from the Celestial Plane could move, they were stopped by Tanya in a maid outfit, who appeared before them. “You there,” she said. “What business do you have with Master Flio’s private residence?” Her wings were out, and she wielded a scythe of the same style as the angels.

“Are you...an angel of the Celestial Plane?” the leader asked.

“I am not,” said Tanya. “I am a maid in service to Master Flio’s house.”

“Wh-What? But you have the wings of an angel on your back, and you carry the scythe used by disciples of the Celestial Plane!” The angels seemed confused.

Tanya slowly tilted her head to the side, puzzled. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m afraid I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Then, she brought her scythe

up in a skillful arc. “But the skull ape is needed by Master Flio due to various circumstances. I have to ask you to give up.”

“P-Preposterous!” said one of the angels.

“Yes!” said the other. “Without the skull ape, we won’t be able to continue our search!”

“Yes, I heard your conversation earlier,” said Tanya. “I understand you are looking for the Calamity Wyrms?”

“A-Ah. Yes, that is correct. The signal was too weak for any of us to follow it, so we were using the skull ape to search...”

Tanya sighed heavily. “That stands to reason,” she said. “After all, the Calamity Wyrms were defeated by Master Flio when they first entered this world.”

“What?!”

“Excuse me?!”

The angels couldn’t believe what they were hearing.

“Impossible! The Calamity Wyrms have legendary vitality, even among the Beasts of Disaster! It would take ten angels to defeat!”

“I see,” said Tanya. “You don’t believe me. Then what do you make of this?” She removed a single bottle from her cleavage. “This is the potion Master Flio made using the blood of the Calamity Wyrms.”

“What was that?!”

“Th-The blood of the Calamity Wyrms?!”

“H-He managed to break through its impenetrable scales to extract its blood?!”

The angels all stared at the potion Tanya had given them. Inside it was a beautiful liquid that shone with all the colors of the rainbow.

“As hard as I find it to believe, I do detect the Calamity Wyrms’ essence in this potion...”

“I can’t imagine anyone taking blood from the Calamity Wyrms if it were still alive...”

“Yes. I believe this suffices as proof of the Calamity Wyrms’ death.”

“In that case,” Tanya said. “I propose the trade of this potion for your skull ape. Would that be agreeable?”

The angels huddled together.

“Wh-What do we do?”

“Skull apes are valuable. There’s nothing they can’t find if you set them looking for it...”

“But that potion...”

“Yes. If we had that potion, we could prove that the Calamity Wyrms is dead.”

“And then...we could return to the Celestial Plane...”

“In that case, the answer’s obvious.”

They nodded and turned back to Tanya. “Very well. We accept your conditions.”

“Understood,” said Tanya. “Then here is your potion.”

“Yes, and in exchange, we will leave the skull ape with you.” The angels flew high into the sky, towards the fracture in the world’s barrier, and vanished.

Tanya watched as they flew away. “I believe that takes care of *that* mess,” she said, gliding back towards Flio’s house.

◇Days Later—Flio’s House◇

“Are you feeling well, my lord husband?” Rys brought something to drink and a plate of simple food to Flio, who was lying in bed. A few days ago, he had transferred Calsi’im’s psychic body into the skull ape, a process that had left him unsteady enough on his feet that Rys had demanded he go to bed and do nothing else until he was rested.

“Thank you, Rys,” said Flio, smiling his usual easygoing smile as he sat up in bed. “I think I’ll be back on my feet soon.”

“My lord husband! You mustn’t!” Rys hurried to Flio and placed her hand on his body, pushing him back down into bed. “I understand how you feel, but please stay in bed for a few days more...” She looked at him with big, worried

eyes.

I'm pretty sure I'm all better, Flio thought as he lay back down. *But I don't want to make Rys worry. I suppose I'll rest up for a while longer.*

"By the way," he said. "How's Tia doing?"



Tia was still in a room on the second story of Flio's workshop. The skull ape Flio had put Calsi'im's psychic body in was sitting in a chair, and she was sitting in its lap, staring out the window. "Calsi'im..." she said, smiling. "The wind feels good today."

The skull ape was dressed in Calsi'im's robes. From a distance, it looked like the old skeleton himself. But it made no response to Tia's words, only continuing to stare out the window.

Tia stood up and went to the kitchen in the back of the room, where she made a pot of tea. "Here, Calsi'im. Please drink it while it's still hot." She held a cup out to the skeleton. But the skull ape didn't respond to that either. It just sat motionless in the chair.

This scene had played out many, many times over the past several days. And yet, Tia smiled happily as she rested her head on the skull ape's lap. *He may not be moving...* she thought, enjoying the sensation of her cheeks against the skull ape's bones. *But I know that this is Calsi'im.*

She closed her eyes. "Calsi'im... I would hate for you to be all on your own. So that's why I will stay by your side, forever and ever..." Suddenly, gaps began to appear around her mouth. She was losing her spirit and turning back into a wooden doll. When magic dolls died, they returned to their original material.

She lay on Calsi'im's lap as her body turned bit by bit to wood. A tear fell from her eye. "Calsi'im..."

Sip...

Just then, a sound filled the room. Tia's eyes shot open.

Sip, sip...

The sound was coming from above her. She slowly looked up to see the skull

ape, who had been perfectly still a moment ago, sipping its tea. Tia could only stare as it drained the cup dry.

“My!” the skull ape said, smiling. “Your tea really is something special, Tia. May I have another cup?”

Tia stared and stared. Her body, nearly entirely wooden now, began to turn back into a magic doll. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she hugged the skull ape—no, *Calsi'im*—tight around the shoulders. She was crying too much to speak, only babbling incoherently as she clung tight, sobbing and sputtering.

Calsi'im gently patted Tia on the head and smiled.





Flio burst into the room when he heard Tia's tears. "Thank goodness..." he said. "It worked..."

Tanya nodded. "Perhaps it merely took some time for Calsi'im's psychic body to learn to control the skull ape."

"Either way," said Flio as he watched Calsi'im and Tia embrace, "I'm glad it worked out."

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

"Papa!" cried Elinàsze. "Are you all better?" It had been two weeks since the incident, and Flio was in the living room for the first time in a while. Elinàsze had prepared breakfast for everyone. When she saw Flio had come downstairs, her face lit up and she ran over to hug him.

Flio smiled his usual easygoing smile as he gently hugged his daughter. "Sorry to make you all worry," he said. "I'm all right now."

Transferring Calsi'im's psychic body had been taxing on Flio's magic, leaving him unsteady on his feet. Rys had ordered complete bed rest for her husband, forbidding him to get out of bed except to use the bathroom.

Although I'm pretty sure I've been perfectly fine for a while, Flio thought to himself.

Everyone gathered around Flio, expressing their concern.

"Lord Flio, are you fully recovered?"

"Dada, you okay? You okay?"

"Lord Flio, please do not push yourself."

"Are you truly all better, my lord husband?" asked Rys, hurrying up to him and pressing her hand against his body, assessing his condition.

Flio smiled calmly. "I'm sorry to worry you, Rys," he said. "I'm fine. Really." He took his seat at the table.

Rys watched her husband with a delighted smile on her face. "Just a moment," she said. "I'll prepare a pot of tea." She headed for the kitchen, only

for Tia to come out of the kitchen door, carefully carrying a kettle.

“Good morning, Lord Flio,” she said. “Would you care for a cup of my tea?” She placed a teacup in front of him.

“Good morning, Tia,” said Flio, accepting the cup with his usual easygoing smile. “Are you getting used to living here?”

Tia looked Flio straight in the eyes, a delighted grin on her face. “Used to it? How could I? I’m so blissfully happy every single day. I hardly know how to handle it!”



Now that Calsi’im had regained consciousness, he and Tia moved into a room on the third floor of Flio’s house. Calsi’im was still getting used to his new body, spending most of his days taking it easy in his room. Sometimes he would visit Sleip and Byleri’s ranch or help out on Blossom’s farm, trying not to push himself too hard as he got used to moving again. Tia—it hardly needed to be said—stayed by his side wherever he went.

Today, Calsi’im was sitting in the chair by the window, looking outside.

“The wind is pleasant today, isn’t it, Calsi’im?” said Tia, smiling happily as she brought Calsi’im a cup of freshly brewed tea.

“Yes,” Calsi’im agreed, bringing the cup of tea to his lips and sipping loudly. “Warm winds like tonight’s are so pleasant...”

“Would you like another cup?” offered Tia.

“Hmm... I believe I quite would! Might I trouble you for another, Tia?”

“Of course! It would be my pleasure and delight to prepare it for you.” Tia took the empty cup to the simple kitchen in the back of their room, where she steeped some tea and prepared him another cup. “Now, Calsi’im, drink it while it’s hot!”

Calsi’im took the fresh cup and sipped it gladly. “You really do make the best tea, Tia!” he said. He let out a breath and turned back to look out the window, a happy look on his face.

Tia slowly brought her head to rest on Calsi’im’s lap, enjoying the sensation of

his bone against her cheek and smiling happily. Calsi'im gently patted her on the head.

"I'm sorry I left you alone, Tia," he said, lovingly stroking her hair. "I'll be with you from now on." Then, suddenly, he jerked his hand away. "Oh, but of course, only if it's what *you* want? I'm afraid I've been somewhat forcing my own feelings onto you."

Tia pressed her finger against Calsi'im's bony mouth, silencing him.

"H-Hm?" he exclaimed.

Tia lifted up her head, bringing her face up close to Calsi'im's. Their faces practically touching, she stared into his eyes. "I belong to you, Calsi'im," she said. "I am merely your possession. From now until forever..." She closed her eyes.

"H-Hwah?! W-Wait! What—" Calsi'im panicked, looking every which way as Tia's face drew closer and closer, her eyes closed and her lips puckered.

Tia sighed softly and held his head still. "You shouldn't make girls embarrass themselves like this..." she said, closing her eyes again. Calsi'im watched with a bewildered look on his face. He cleared his throat, and then, slowly, he brought his bony mouth up to her lips.

It is said that when a magic doll dies, they return to their original form—that of a wooden puppet. And when a magic doll learns the true joy of life, it is possible for them to become a living person. But in this world, there was yet no example of a magic doll who had done this.

Tia slowly opened her eyes. "Calsi'im... I am ever so happy." She smiled, a pink blush on her cheeks.

Calsi'im smiled back. *Tia's emotions are getting so deep, he thought. Every day I see her make entirely new expressions. It's almost like she's turning into a demon...or a human, even...*



A dire crow appeared outside the window as Calsi'im and Tia smiled at each other. This was Calsi'im's familiar. On the day Tia had vanished from the Dark

Citadel, it had set off on a journey, flying all over the land in search of her.

Having found not only Tia but also Calsi'im himself, the crow tried to fly in. But then, it noticed that Calsi'im and Tia were having a bit of an intimate moment. Good Sir Caw-lins prided itself on its ability to read the atmosphere of a room.

It perched restlessly atop the roof and decided to wait for a better opportunity to make its entrance.

◇Dark Citadel—Throne Room◇

“Now, if there is no further news, shall we conclude this morning’s meeting?” Dawkson’s minion Phufun, standing beside her master, pressed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and surveyed the gathered demons.

Zanzibar, who had been appointed a member of the Infernal Four just moments earlier, raised his hand. “May I?” he ventured.

“Yes, go ahead, Zanzibar.”

“Dark One Dawkson... What is your intention in appointing me a member of the Infernal Four? I am the man who led an army of rebels against you.” *In fact, he thought, when he called me to this meeting, I was fairly certain I was about to be executed in front of the whole throne room.* Cold sweat ran down his face as he looked up at the Dark One.

“Oh yeah, that,” said Dawkson. “Look, Zanzibar. You’ve been leading the devils for a long time. You’ve got all kinds of knowledge, and you’re popular. Besides, you had top-notch leadership and tactics and plans and stuff during the rebellion. I just thought it’d be useful to have you working for the Dark Army, what with how good you are at stuff.” Dawkson bowed his head in respect. “The past is water under the bridge, so long as you keep helping out with the Dark Army.”

Everyone in the throne room began murmuring in surprise, whispering to each other and stealing glances at the Dark One.

“Th-The Dark One Dawkson bowed his head!”

“When he was *Yuigarde*, he’d never bow his head to anyone...”

“Maybe he really *has* changed...”

“In that case,” Zanzibar answered, “I have no reason to refuse. From here on, I, Zanzibar, shall serve the Dark One Dawkson to my utmost, until—”

“Oh, one thing,” Dawkson interrupted, raising his hand and grinning apologetically. “Sorry to cut you off. But you’re not gonna be serving me. You’re gonna be serving the Dark Army.”

“I see,” said Zanzibar. “In that case, I shall serve the Dark Army to my utmost, until my very bones break.”

“Great. I appreciate it.” Dawkson bowed again.

Ever since he had returned to the Dark Citadel as the Dark One, Dawkson had begun holding daily morning meetings with the ranking officers of the Dark Army. *Blondie used to get everyone together in the mornings to talk about the day’s plans, after all...* he thought, a smile coming to his face as he recalled his travels with Hero Gold-Hair.

When the meeting finished, the officers filed out of the throne room. Then, almost as if she had been tagged in, a shadow demon woman ran inside. “Dark One Dawkson, do you have a moment?”

“Sure. What’s up, Falmeil?”

Dawkson had had many opportunities to watch Riliangiu work as both a scout and information specialist while he had traveled with Hero Gold-Hair’s party. The experience had taught him the importance of reconnaissance. So upon his return he had sent out a call for shadow demons and appointed Falmeil, who responded to the summons, an intelligence operative.

“The eldest son of the chief of the ice giants who live in the foothills of the Needle Mountains north of the Dark Citadel is celebrating his wedding today. Also, there are signs that the belligerents in the forest nearby have ceased their activities.”

Falmeil was a true shadow demon, adept at disguise and infiltration. She had all sorts of ways of gathering intelligence. Her job was to keep Dawkson apprised of all happenings in the lands around the Dark Citadel.

After Falmeil's report was finished, Dawkson turned to look at Phufun. "Hey, Phufun. Send the ice giant chief's son a present or something. You can pick out whatever seems good. And do you mind asking if there's any news about *him* while you're there? Oh, and send a team to investigate what's going on in the forest."

"Yes, Master. It will be done at once." Phufun bowed deeply and made to leave the throne room. But before she left, she turned around. "Um... Actually, Master... May I ask you something?"

"Yeah? What is it?"

"Oh, it's nothing important..." Phufun pushed her glasses up. "But I've noticed that you have been standing whenever we are in here, instead of sitting on the throne. Why is that?"

Dawkson awkwardly cleared his throat. "Well, you know..." he said. "Even Calsi'im kept saying that it would be presumptuous for him to sit on the throne. So I figure a half-baked Dark One like me's got no right to. Or something." Dawkson scratched his cheek as he spoke.

Phufun smiled. "I see. I believe that is a fine sentiment." She bowed deeply and left.

He really did change on his journey, she thought, nodding happily to herself. But then, a look of dissatisfaction crossed her face. But I am a little nostalgic for the days when he'd shout, "Don't ask me boring questions!" and punch me in the face...

Phufun was a masochist of a succubus. For her, the highest pleasure in the world was being sent flying by Yuigarde.



The Dark One Dawkson continued to do his best, day after day after day. He didn't scream in rage, but listened to everyone's opinions and only acted after giving matters due consideration. Gradually, demons everywhere heard about his strange transformation.

◇Meanwhile, with Hero Gold-Hair◇

Hero Gold-Hair and his companions stood in a forest near the Dark Citadel.

“All right, that looks good,” Hero Gold-Hair declared, stomping on the newly refilled hole with his foot and letting out a sigh of satisfaction.

“It took a while to track them down,” said Valentine, “but I believe we’ve seen the last of the fools plotting to take over the Dark Citadel. Now, let’s go find something delicious to eat!” She cheered, raising her arms high above her head.

Riliangiu, who had just returned from scouting, nodded. “I no longer sense the presence of any more conspirators.”

“Great,” said Hero Gold-Hair. “Hopefully all this work will help take a load off Dawkson’s shoulders. He just got back, you know. The least we can do is help him out.” He returned the Drilldozer Shovel to his Bottomless Bag and turned back to the road. “Now, with that finished, let’s head to a human town and get some food!”

“I couldn’t agree more!” Valentine ran up beside him, draping her arms around his shoulders. “Three cheers for Hero Gold-Hair!”

“Ummm...” said Tsuya. “Hero Gold-Haaair?”

“What is it, Tsuya?”

“Oh, it’s just... Are you suuure we can’t go see Dawkson before we leeeave?” She looked up at the Dark Citadel through the gaps in the trees.

Hero Gold-Hair shook his head. “He’s going to be busy for a while.” Then, he turned his back to the citadel and started down the road.

Tsuya furrowed her brow as she followed along behind. *Peeersonally*, she thought, *I’d like to get Mister Daaawkson to give Valentine just ooone more charge of magic...* She looked up at Valentine, who was walking ahead of her.

“With Dawkson gone,” Valentine said, “I’ll have to eat lots and lots tonight to charge up on magic!”

Valentine was from the Realm of Evil, a world with much higher atmospheric magic density. In order to live in the world of Klyrode, she required regular infusions of high volumes of magic energy. Until only recently she had been able to siphon off Dawkson’s inexhaustible supply through the medium of their

lips. But with Dawkson gone, she would have to return to getting magic from food and magic gems, absorbing the magic contained within physical material.

Tears came to Tsuya's eyes as she checked the contents of the group's wallet. *Waaah...* she lamented. *Our food budget was sooo much lighter with Dawkson here...*

Epilogue

“And... That does it!” Rys said as she hung the sheets up to dry on the rack. “We’ve had so much more laundry lately.” She nodded proudly as she surveyed her handiwork.

“Mistress Rys!” Tanya shouted, jumping out of a second-floor window. She swung the mop she had been using to clean the hallway like a scythe and hefted it over her shoulder as her wings materialized, breaking her fall. She landed next to Rys. “If there’s laundry to be done, please allow *me* to take care of it!”

“Thank you, Tanya, but I can handle this much on my own.” Rys smiled at the maid. “Haven’t I told you over and over again that you need to rest? You work every day from dusk until dawn...”

“Thank you for your concern,” Tanya answered. “But I am happiest when I am working.”

“That won’t do, Tanya! Even my lord husband overexerted his magic and fell ill the other day! You need to get your rest when you can!” As Flio’s wife, Rys felt like it was her responsibility to look after the well-being of everyone living in the house.

“I understand...” said Tanya, albeit reluctantly. “If you insist, Mistress Rys, I shall rest with all my strength.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it,” Rys said. *Did she say “rest with all her strength?”* she thought. *That seems a little off...* But she didn’t press the matter.

Just then, a magic circle appeared in front of the doorway to Flio’s house, and a portal emerged. Rys’s eyes lit up at the sight. “Oh! My lord husband!” Putting the laundry basket down, she bolted over to the magic circle just in time for the door to open and for Flio to step out. “My lord husband, welcome home!”

“Hello, Rys. It’s always a pleasure to have you come and greet me.” Flio gave her one of his usual easygoing smiles. The magic circle vanished and he stepped out towards the front door.

Rys nuzzled up close beside him. “How did your meeting go?”

“Oh, you know. It was a meeting with the Klyrode army about what to do about the peace treaty, but the Dark One Dawkson just sent over papers confirming the treaty’s extension. There wasn’t much to discuss.”

“I see,” said Rys. “And that’s why you’re back so soon, I suppose.”

“I suppose,” agreed Flio. “Although being a Councilor for the Magical Kingdom seems to come with a lot of responsibility...”

Flio had originally been summoned to this world as a candidate to be Hero, but he had been found wanting and sent into exile. Afterwards, the Maiden Queen had taken the throne. She believed that only Flio was worthy of the title Hero, but the previous King, her father, had already appointed someone else. By law, she could not name Flio the new Hero. Still, she had wanted to give him some acknowledgment for his work from the shadows bringing peace to the Magical Kingdom. In the end, she had created a wholly new position to appoint Flio to—Councilor for the Magic Kingdom.

Flio bashfully scratched the back of his head as Rys smiled at him adoringly. “Say, Rys,” he said. “Do you have any plans later today?”

“Today?” Rys asked. “Well, Sybe and I were going to go hunting together, I believe. Nothing especially urgent.”

“In that case, would you like to accompany me while I drive some goods out east? Remember back when I was making nonurgent deliveries in order to expand the number of places I can get to with Teleportation? I think I’d like to get back to that.”

“Oh!” Rys nodded eagerly. “So much has happened since then, with the babies and everything. I had completely forgotten!”

“There’s no rush, but I do need to deliver them at some point,” Flio said. “Besides, I like the idea of going on a slow-paced journey with you for a change.” He gave her one of his easygoing smiles. Rys nodded happily.

Sybe, in its unicorn rabbit form, ran up to the pair. It came to a stop beside them, beginning its transformation into a psychobear.

“You’ve gotten really good at changing your shape, Sybe,” Flio said. “It’s honestly incredible.”

“Gworf!” Sybe grunted happily at the praise, rearing up onto two legs and thumping its chest.

“Well, my lord husband...” said Rys. “Shall we be off?”

“Yeah! Hang on, I left the wagon in my Bottomless Bag...” Flio pulled out the wagon, which appeared before them, and Sybe ran up, strapping itself into the harness.

“You seem happy to go on this journey with us too, Sybe!” said Rys.

Sybe nodded. “Gworf!”

“Then let’s head out!” Flio said. “I’m all ready.” He held up his right arm and a magic circle appeared, followed by a large portal. This was a different portal than the one he had used to return from Klyrode Castle—it was a large double gate that looked like it belonged to a fortress. “All right. Let’s head back to where we got to last time.” Flio settled into the driver’s seat and flicked his finger. The door opened wide, revealing the stretch of road they had reached before they were attacked by the Calamity Wyrms.

The sunlight filtered through the trees as Sybe pulled the wagon along at a leisurely pace down the road. With its large body, even its casual walking speed pulled them along at quite a fast clip.

“I’m glad we can travel slowly like this sometimes,” Rys said, smiling. “It’s nice.”

“Yeah,” said Flio, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her in close. “I think so too.”

And the wagon traveled on through the forest.



Side Story: Everyone's Morrow Part 7

◇Deep in a Forest◇

In a forest in the mountains far from Castle Klyrode, the two-headed doppeladler Hugi-Mugi, formerly of the Infernal Four, walked through the forest. They had gotten fed up with Yuigarde's tyrannical disposition and retired from the Dark Army to live disguised as a human.

"That lightning was quite something, yes!" they said, inclining their head as they walked on. "Yes, it was quite something!"

Behind them followed a retinue of enormous wolf-and bear-type magic beasts. They had lived in this forest before Hugi-Mugi had arrived here. When Hugi-Mugi first took up residence in the middle of the beasts' territory, the beasts had tried to drive them out with the full force of their numbers, only to be met with an enormous doppeladler. Instinctually, they knew they had no way to win, so they pledged their service to Hugi-Mugi as familiars. Now, Hugi-Mugi walked through the forest with them like an escort.

Walking along on either side of Hugi-Mugi were two human women, each pressing up close.

Cartha, who ran a farm outside of the forest, smiled and wrapped herself around Hugi-Mugi's right arm. The other woman, Shino, who ran a general store in the village, gave Cartha the side-eye as she held on to their left.

"I saw something like a golden dragon in the sky!" exclaimed Cartha. "And then, before I knew it, there was fire everywhere! If Hugi hadn't shown up to put out all those fires, my house might have been burnt too!"

"You're quite right," said Shino. "If it weren't for Hugi-Mugi, my wagon and merchandise would be ashes now." She gazed up at Hugi-Mugi with a smile that put Cartha's to shame.

"We weren't trying to save you two, no," said Hugi-Mugi. "Some flying magic beast caused a forest fire, yes, and I went to put it out! If it had spread much

farther, my friends would have been in danger, yes!” They glanced back, at the magic beasts who had become their familiars following along.

Just one day prior, the Calamity Wyrms had escaped from the angels of the Celestial Plane mid-transit and fled to the world of Klyrode, where it happened to run into Flio, who captured it with the spell Twilight of the Gods. But the lightning it had released had lit fires all over, including in the forest where Hugi-Mugi made their home. They had extinguished the fire in order to protect their own house and the place where their familiars lived. Cartha’s house and Shino’s wagon were caught up in the fire as well, and Hugi-Mugi had saved them by pure coincidence.

“We’ve told you many times, yes! Yes, many times! We were just focused on fighting the fire, yes! We weren’t trying to save you two, no, so there’s no need for thanks. But we are happy to see you safe, yes. Yes, very happy.” Hugi-Mugi looked between the two women holding each of their arms.

Cartha smiled back. *He saved my life, she thought, but he doesn’t want me to think I owe him anything. Hugi is so gallant! I was born on a farm and grew up doing nothing but farmwork. After my relationship with my childhood friend Gorric went sour, I thought I would never marry. But now, this handsome person is in my life! Their past is a mystery, but they’re so cool and mysterious... And so youthful and handsome! They have just the kind of face I like, and they’re strong enough to have all those giant magic beasts as familiars! Oh, I simply must become their wife!*

On Hugi-Mugi’s opposite side, Shino, too, gazed up at them with a smile on her face. *How kindhearted of them, not only to not ask for a reward for saving me, but to refuse to take it as a debt at all! It’s been a few years since my parents died and left me a general store in a village in the middle of nowhere. Most of my customers have been old men coming around to harass me! There have been all those adventurers recently, coming here to hunt that golden magic beast, but most of them have partners... I can’t believe that I ran into such an attractive person at my old friend Cartha’s house! I don’t really know anything about them, which worries me a bit, but they look young and handsome and put-together, and they’re strong enough to have all of those magic beasts as familiars! I simply must marry them!*

Both girls' eyes went heart-shaped, their cheeks flushed as they pressed up closer to Hugi-Mugi.

"W-Wait, both of you?!" Hugi-Mugi protested. "I can't walk if you crowd me so much, yes! Yes, no crowding!"

"That's right, Shino!" Cartha said. "Don't crowd Hugi so much!"

"What about you?" Shino shot back. "Why don't *you* stop crowding them?"

"Excuse me?!"

"Excuse yourself!"

The two glared daggers at each other, with Hugi-Mugi trapped between them. Hugi-Mugi sighed. "Why do human girls press so close to you when they walk, yes?" they muttered to themselves, but they didn't particularly try to escape from the girls' grasp.

At first, Cartha and Shino had been surprised to learn about the magic beasts, but by now, they had learned that the beasts were absolutely loyal to Hugi-Mugi. They paid them no mind, simply focusing their attention on Hugi-Mugi as the group made their way deeper into the forest.

Meanwhile, in the nearby village, a number of men ran into the square, shouting loudly. "Th-There's trouble! A pack of magic beasts moving through the forest!"

The villagers blanched with fear as they gathered around.

"That pack again? So soon after that horrible enormous monster?"

"There've been fewer adventurers coming to the village lately, thanks to that group."

"Most adventurers get taken out by the magic beasts before they even lay eyes on the golden one."

"They don't usually injure people... But still, something must be done."

"Yes. Before someone gets seriously hurt..."

They talked on and on, but nobody in the village realized that it was Hugi-

Mugi leading the magic beasts around the forest.

◇After Dinner—A Hallway in Flio's House◇

Dinner was over and Belano was making her way through the house back to her room. *Folmina was only just born, and she's already incredible with magic... she thought. And Ghoros and Rislei are going to be enrolling in the Houghtow College of Magic soon for their primary education... Elinàsze and Garyl have been in school for a while, and they're learning magic at an incredible rate. As their teacher, I need to work hard myself so I can hold my head high in front of them...*

Belano squeezed her fists tight and sped up as she walked. Yes... she thought. *I need to work harder...so that Lord Flio will praise me...*

Belano saw Flio as something of a surrogate for her brother and father, who had both died in the war against the Dark Army. She admired him quite a lot.

Although, that magic doll Lord Flio made, Minilio... He's usually no bigger than a child, but he can use magic to make himself look just like Lord Flio. I believe he's working at the store today too, in Lord Flio's place. He's really incredible, but he's so cute when he's child-sized... He looks just like a child version of Flio... Yes, he's very cute... He's cute that way...and the other way too...

Belano's cheeks turned red as her thoughts turned to Minilio. Then, suddenly, her eyes locked on to something in front of her—Minilio was standing in the hallway. He was carrying a wooden box and making his way towards the stairs, headed towards the workshop behind the house that doubled as his living space.

Belano went stock-still and followed Minilio with her eyes. *Oh!* she thought, her face turning redder still. *He's so cute! So, so cute! I can't believe there's such a cute thing living in this world! Oh, although I suppose Minilio is a magic doll. He isn't exactly "alive." But that doesn't matter! Cuteness is justice! Cuteness is supreme!* All sorts of strange thoughts ran through her head as she stared at Minilio.

Minilio cocked his head and looked back at Belano, puzzled by the way she was acting. But he didn't seem very troubled by it. He just bowed politely in passing and carried the box down the stairs.

Oh... Belano thought. He bowed! Minilio bowed his head! So precious!!!

She mentally replayed the scene again and again, just barely suppressing a powerful nosebleed.

◇Meanwhile, in Hiya's Mindscape◇

Hiya, the djinn who commanded the origin of light and darkness, generally spent most of their time in their own mental world with their two so-called training partners: Damalynas, the Grand Magus of Midnight, and Maglion, formerly one of the Twelve Evil Generals of the Realm of Evil. Unlike Damalynas, who could venture out into the world as a body constructed of psychic mass, the djinn Maglion required a tremendous amount of power to sustain their psychic body. They could only exist within Hiya's mindscape, where they were sustained by Hiya's wellspring of magic.

"What's wrong, Your Divinity?" Damalynas asked, a worried look on her face as she cuddled close to Hiya. They all lay on a bed surrounded by an endless expanse of whiteness. "You suddenly went all pale..."

"My Kin," inquired Maglion, cuddling close from Hiya's opposite side and looking up with an identical worried expression. "Your heart was suddenly disturbed. Has something happened?"

Hiya smiled at the two sharing their bed. "It is nothing to worry about, you two," they said. "I was simply reliving old traumas..."

"Old traumas?"

"Indeed..." Hiya said, shaking their head in shame. "I was thinking of my old foolish self, who bared their fangs at the Exalted One only to be beaten within an inch of their life." *I was so conceited back then...* they thought. *I looked down on the Exalted One as nothing more than a common human. And foolishly, I challenged him, only to face such a merciless beating.*

Back then, Flio had flown into a rage at Hiya for hurting Rys and pummeled them into submission with his bare fists. The thought of it made Hiya tremble a little even now.

"The deeds of the Exalted One..." Hiya began. "Defeating a Beast of Disaster on his own... Fusing a magic creature from another world with the faintest of

psychic bodies... They tell me that I cannot be satisfied as I am now. I must seek greater and greater heights. I have been permitted the great honor of playing the least role in the Exalted One's household. As the djinn who commands the origin of light and darkness, I must train ever more so that I may draw even slightly closer to his level." They nodded with determination, squeezing both hands tight.

"I'll gladly train with you, Your Divinity!" said Damalynas.

"Although I am terribly unworthy, My Kin," said Maglion, "I, too, would accompany you, if you would have me."

The pair took Hiya's hands in their own.

"You two would seek ever greater heights with me, together as training partners?"

"Yes! Gladly!"

"Of course!"

The two both nodded their firm assent. Then, Damalynas leaned in to whisper in Hiya's ear. "Although, Your Divinity..." she said. "Which training would you like to do first? The magic...or me?" Blushing, the Grand Magus of Midnight crawled up on top of Hiya, pushing them down onto the bed.

"Excuse me, may I join in as well?" Maglion said, crawling on top of Hiya and blushing furiously themselves.

Maglion was a djinn from the Realm of Evil and a specialist in magic. But just like Hiya, they had known nothing of sex until recently. But after getting a taste of the fruits of Hiya and Damalynas's training, they came to desire participation in the training themselves.

Maglion and Damalynas gazed at Hiya with hot lust in their eyes. *Magic, of course! Well, that is what I had meant to say,* Hiya thought. *But my dear training partners Damalynas and Maglion likely wish to do this part first instead. Such is life, I suppose.* They smiled and gently took Damalynas and Maglion in their arms. The pair beamed with delight.

The three spent quite some time training in Hiya's mindscape. It was two days

before anyone in Flio's house saw them again.

◇Houghtow College of Magic—Faculty Office◇

In one corner of the Houghtow College of Magic faculty office sat a woman with blue hair she wore in braids that came down to the back of her neck, looking over the papers on her desk. This was Nyt, formerly the Serpent Princess Yorminyt of the Dark Army's Infernal Four. The name Yorminyt, however, was known to many in the Klyrode army—not just demons. But she had lost faith in the Dark Army thanks to the former Dark One Yuigarde's tyrannical disposition and now taught at the Houghtow College of Magic in the form of a demihuman.

Nyt glanced at the newspaper lying on her desk. *Hmmm... she thought. Ssso Yuigarde changed hisss name to Dawkssson, and now they're calling him the new Dark One. I, for one, can't imagine that a persssonality like that could be ssso easily fixed. But I sssuppose it no longer hasss anything to do with me...* Nyt cleaned up her desk and began getting ready for her next class.

"Oh, Miss Nyt. Do you have a moment?" Oryou, the head of the college's primary school class and the offensive magic teacher, called Nyt over to her.

"Yesss, Miss Oryou? Is there sssomething you need?"

"The teacher for Class A's next lesson is out sick, I'm afraid. Would you be able to fill in?"

"Yesss, of course. But are you sssure? What is the lesssso about?"

"Magic projection arts."

"Ah, Metálzobi's sssubject. Yesss, I believe I can handle that."

"Thank you! That's a big help. Good luck with the class!" Oryou bowed her head. Nyt waved goodbye.

Magic projection artssss... she thought as she left the room. The art of creating an image with magic and materializing it into the world as a magic beassst or the like. It's jussst a parlor trick, really, but it'sss an important firssst ssstep to mastering sssummoning magic. I'm not ssspecialist, but I at leassst know enough to teach young children.

An hour later, Nyt returned to the faculty office, having finished her lesson on magic projection arts.

“Oh,” said Oryou, calling her over again. “Miss Nyt, do you have a moment?”

“Yesss, what is it?”

“I’m terribly sorry to keep asking this of you, but could you please fill in for Class C’s next lesson?”

“And what is the sssubject?”

“Shadow magic.”

“Ah, Miss Cathbeir’s sssubject. Yesss, I believe I can handle that.”

Some hours later still, Oryou called Nyt over again. “I’m so sorry, but could you teach Class B’s class on pharmaceutical magic?”

“Yesss, I believe I can handle that.”

And hours later again...

“Class D needs someone to teach magiophysical education...”

“Yesss, I believe I can handle that.”

When Nyt finally returned to the faculty office, she took a look at the school’s class schedule. *I sssuppose a magic ussser like me is as good as almighty as a teacher in thisss school. It ssseems I can handle every sssingle sssubject they teach...*

Nyt glanced around the room. Across from her was Belano, a defensive magic specialist. And sitting next to her was Hiero, a specialist in magic outdoorsmanship. Metálzobi and Cathbeir, whom she had substituted for earlier, were specialists in magic projection arts and shadow magic respectively. Perhaps it was difficult to find faculty of a high enough level to teach multiple kinds of magic in such a rural school. Houghtow College of Magic had a very

small faculty, after all.

I sssuppose I am good at teaching too, after all that time training my sssubordinates to use magic... Nyt thought. But then, something struck her. She folded her arms. *Hang on a minute. Did they actually put me down as able to teach any sssubject?!*

They really were assigning her as a substitute for far too many classes. It seemed like they might have forgotten what the job they'd hired her for actually was.

◇The Celestial Plane—Central Management Tower◇

One day, a group of angels arrived at the central management tower in the middle of the Celestial Plane to deliver a report on the outcome of their mission.

“Your mission was to destroy the Calamity Wyrms that appeared in the world of Lillica, or else imprison it in the underground world Dogorogma. Have you achieved this?” a goddess asked, looking over the report. This was the goddess responsible for overseeing the world of Lillica, where the beast had first appeared, and the direct superior of the group of angels.

“Let me see...” she read, furrowing her brow. “You say you captured the Calamity Wyrms, but it broke free en route to Dogorogma and fled to a nearby world, where you were able to exterminate it with the help of the world’s inhabitants. Is this true? Even the goddess of an entire world would struggle to simply kill a Beast of Disaster. For mere angels and denizens of a random world to defeat such a being beggars imagination. Do you mean to tell me that there is someone residing in one of the planetoid worlds who has the power to defeat a Beast of Disaster? If so, we must take measures at once.”

The leader of the group of angels quietly clicked her tongue in frustration. *I knew it...* she thought. *She doesn’t believe us after that case a few years back when a group of angels fabricated a false report to avoid punishment for losing a Beast of Disaster mid-transit and letting it destroy a world. It’s something they take very seriously. Even the goddesses, our superiors, are punished with exile sometimes for lying in their reports...* She reached into her Bottomless Bag and pulled out a bottle filled with some kind of potion. “My goddess, please

examine this potion. It is proof that the Calamity Wyrms have been defeated.”

“This is your proof? What is this? It glows with the light of the rainbow... I have never seen a potion this color before.” The goddess inspected the bottle the angel leader gave her closely, holding it up to the light from all angles.

“This is, in fact, a potion made with the vanquished Calamity Wyrms’ blood.”

“Wh-What?!” the Goddess opened her eyes wide in shock. “The Calamity Wyrms’ body is protected by impenetrable scales, and when one dies it is said that its body turns hard like stone. It should be impossible to extract one’s blood! But this is even more than that. Its blood’s been made into a potion. How in the heavens...?” The goddess furrowed her brow and held her other hand up to the bottle, emitting light from her palm and showering the potion with beams of light. She peered at it dubiously, uncertain what to think. “I would dismiss this as nonsense, but this potion truly does contain the essence of the Calamity Wyrms. I suppose, one way or another, this does serve as solid proof that the Calamity Wyrms have been slain.” The goddess sighed. “Shall I deliver your report to the Central Management Tower as it is written, then?”

A wave of palpable relief washed over the angels.

The next day, a goddess from the Central Management tower was inspecting a potion given to her by the goddess in charge of the world called Lilica along with her report. “This... This is...” she stammered, her hands beginning to shake. “She told me that this potion was made with materials from a Beast of Disaster, but I assumed it would be an inferior product, made by planetoid world dwellers who lack our magic techniques. But *this* is...”

She stared into the rainbow-colored liquid and swallowed nervously. She opened the bottle with a *pop* and drank it in a single gulp. Immediately, her body began to glow.

“This is *incredible*! A single drink was enough to cure my chronic back pain, my stiff neck, my sleep deprivation, *and* my general fatigue! And not only that! My skin, which had gone dry and flaky from years of overtime, has become smooth and youthful once more! You couldn’t find such a potion even in the best apothecaries on the Celestial Plane!”

She spent some time looking over her face in the mirror, not bothering to conceal her excitement in the slightest. “A-According to the report, a resident of the planetoid world of Klyrode made this potion... I simply must have more, no matter the cost! As much as possible! Regular shipments if I can!”

◇Calgosi Coast—In front of the Van Biel Manor◇

“Wh-What? Why?!” Countess Junia Van Biel, the governor of the Calgosi Coast, stared in disbelief at the guest who had appeared before her house. Behind her stood her familiars Loplanz, Rolindeim, and Polseidon. They, too, looked like they couldn’t believe their eyes.

In front of the four stood a man with a patchy long black beard and a robust physique. “I told you,” he said. “I, Captain Eddsarch of the Blackbeard Corsairs, and all of my men are pledging allegiance to Countess Junia Van Biel.” He laughed with a mighty “Gah ha ha!” as he grinned wildly at Junia. Behind him, nearly fifteen pirates flashed perfectly identical grins.

Polseidon looked out at the crowd, stroking his long white beard. “You...” he said. “Time and time and time and time and time and time and *time* again, no matter how often we beat you, you always come back to start another fight, saying this time you’re gonna ‘check in’ with the Countess, whatever that means. So what in the *hells* is making you suddenly reverse course?”

“Well, you know,” said Eddsarch. “Until recently, all you had in your corner was the white-bearded old man, the dark-skinned girl, and the bird. I thought we’d be sure to overwhelm you with sheer numbers *eventually*...”

“H-Hang on!” objected Loplanz. “Did you just call me a *bird*?! I’ll have you know that I am the rukh avian Loplanz!”

“Yes, yes,” said Rolindeim. “But be quiet for a moment, would you, birdie? Let’s keep the conversation on track, right?”

“Hey! Not you too, Rolindeim!” Loplanz’s temper flared even higher, but Rolindeim clapped a hand over his mouth, silencing him.

Junia glanced at Loplanz and then back to Captain Eddsarch. “C-Continue...” she said.

“Right, right. Well, we did our best trying to wear you down with our

numbers, but then, suddenly you got a whole bunch of new crewmates!”

“Ah,” said Polseidon. “You mean the Van Biel Navy!”

The Van Biel Navy was composed of former demon pirates, who now served directly under Junia Van Biel herself.

“Exactly!” said Eddsarch. “With them in the picture, us pirates are out of luck! Even Shaxablenna of the Ladyshark Pirates ended up getting a job at an inn somewhere. Lots of pirates ended up finding new careers. At this rate, the future looks bleak for the Blackbeard Corsairs. We wanna switch sides and work for you like the old demon pirate crew did. Gah ha ha!”

But secretly, Eddsarch had other things in mind. *Hur hur hur... With that as my excuse, my sweet Junia will believe me to be one of her companions! But when she lets her guard down, I will sneak into her bed, and finally, finally, I'll check in! It's the perfect plan! And when she's my woman, I'll become the boss of the whole Calgosi Coast! I'll be able to do whatever I want!*

“Hmm...” said Junia. “Let me see... He’s thinking, ‘*With that as my excuse, my sweet Junia will believe me to be one of her companions! But when she lets her guard down, I will sneak into her bed, and finally, finally, I'll check in! It's the perfect plan! And when she's my woman, I'll become the boss of the whole Calgosi Coast! I'll be able to do whatever I want!*’”

“Yes, exactly!” said Eddsarch. And then, realizing what Junia had said, he jumped up into the air, his eyes bulging out in shock. “Wait, what?! H-How did you know exactly what I was thinking?!”

Junia looked up at him, her shoulders trembling. “I-I can r-read the minds of the people around me using magic...” she said. “Y-You’ll never check in, you know...!”

Behind her, Polseidon suddenly grew giant-sized, while Loplanz transformed into his rukh form. The members of the Van Biel navy standing nearby reached for their weapons, glaring daggers at Eddsarch.

“C-Curses!” Eddsarch spat. “We may be retreating for now, but... W-Wait! When did we get surrounded by the Van Biel Navy?!”

Eddsarch and his Blackbeard Corsairs finally realized that members of the

navy were all around them, standing in a circle with Eddsarch at its center.

Junia waved her arm. “D-Do it!” she commanded. Her face was pure red—after all, she had just had to witness Eddsarch’s mental image of herself in a state of being *checked in* on. At her signal, Polseidon, Rolindeim, Loplanz, and the members of the navy attacked as one.

“Drat and damnation!” yelled Eddsarch, making a lewd gesture with his thumb as he was overrun. “I’ll check in next time, Junia Van Biel!!!”

◇Houghtow City—Flio’s House◇

Flio’s household by now had grown to an impressive number of residents. They had not only a men’s bath and a women’s bath, but also a mixed-gender bath big enough to accommodate ten people at once.

That night in the women’s bath, the mothers of the house—Rys, Uliminas, Balirossa, and Byleri—were taking a soak together.

“Folmina, Ghorro, and Rislei have all grown up so fast...” Rys said, looking around with a smile. “Soon it will be time to start thinking about school.”

“Meow’re right,” Uliminas nodded. “Folmina can mewve around by herself now. I guess it’s something we’ve gotta think about...”

“Do you remember how Folmina tried to climb on Ghozal’s head right after she was born?” said Balirossa.

“Of course! She was clinging onto his hair fur dear life! And then Ghozal got all serious and went, ‘*You’re gonna make me go bald!*’” Uliminas said, doing an uncannily accurate imitation of Ghozal. The other three burst into laughter.

“But...” said Rys, “How was Folmina able to climb so high on his body, I wonder?”

“Mew know, I asked her myself at the time,” said Uliminas. “She was meowll, *I dunno... I guess because my papa Ghozal’s head was up there...*” This time she did an impression of her daughter Folmina, and again, it was eerily accurate.

The other three grinned in amusement.

“That, like, totally sounds like her!”

“Yes, you’re spot on!”

“You know,” said Rys, “Ghoro is quite fond of Folmina. He’s always following along wherever she goes.”

“Yes, you’re quite right...” Balirossa furrowed her brow. “I actually asked him the other day if he likes Folmina or his mother better, since he’s always following her around, and he just smiled and said, *‘I like big sis Folmina!’* without a moment’s hesitation...”

“Th-That’s terrible!” exclaimed Uliminas.

“Like, jeez! That must’ve been a shock...” said Byleri. The two placed their hands on Balirossa’s shoulders.

“No, it’s all right,” said Balirossa. “I admit it was a shock at the time, but...when I see Ghoro smile like that, I just... I just... Ahhh!” Her face turned bright red as she desperately tried to explain.



“Oh, I understand,” said Rys. “Ghoro’s smile has a healing effect on people.”

“Yeah!” agreed Uliminas. “He’s always taking it easy, but that’s what makes him so cute!”

The two nodded in agreement.

Balirossa squeezed her hands together tight. “Yes! Yes! Oh, it makes me so happy that you understand how cute Ghoro is!” Tears of passion welled up in her eyes.

“And like, my Rislei is so serious?” said Byleri. “She helps me out more than I help her, sometimes...” She pressed her finger against her cheek, reflecting.

“Yes,” said Rys. “Rislei is very grown-up for her age. She really takes after our Elinàsze.”

“No, no!” objected Byleri. “Like, Elinàsze’s on a totally different level. I’m pretty sure she could just about pass as someone’s wife already.”

Rys gave a dry smile. “Yes...” she said. “But Elinàsze is such a papa’s girl. I’m a bit worried about finding a suitable partner for her...”

“We’re, like, the opposite,” said Rislei. “Our papa loves his daughter, like, a little *too* much...”

“Yeah,” said Uliminas. “Sleip’ll come running at a meowment’s notice, shouting ‘*Risleiiii!!!*’ And then he’ll pick her up and rub his cheeks all meowver her... I think I might actually hate him?” This time, Uliminas did an impression, just as spot-on as the previous two, of Sleip’s voice, causing the other three to burst into laughter.

“Like,” said Byleri, “but you know, I wonder... Rislei totally acts like she hates it when her papa picks her up, but she really does love him. Sometimes she says stuff like, ‘*I never said I didn’t like it...*’ She’s so unbelievably shy! It’s totally adorable!” Byleri’s cheeks turned red, her arms practically vibrating as she explained. The other three nodded along.

“Incidentally, Garyl seems to be quite popular with the ladies at school,” said Balirossa.

“Yes, doesn’t he?” Rys gushed. “There are so many girls coming to our house

every day before school! At first, I thought they were Elinàsze's friends, but she told me, *'They're my friends too, but everyone always wants to spend time with Garyl after school...'*"

"Hey," said Byleri. "Like, do any of you feel like Her Majesty is, like, coming over so often to see Garyl?"

Rys cocked her head. "I wonder..." she said. "But Garyl is quite fond of the Maiden Queen himself. He always calls her 'the nice and pretty lady'..."

"Garyl always speaks his mind, after all," said Balirossa. "When Her Majesty was with us in the Alips mountains, he called her 'nice and pretty' directly to her face. I believe it caused her some amount of distress! Her Majesty has always put the kingdom first, you know. I've never heard any rumors to suggest she's had any love affairs at all."

"Well, as far as I'm concerned, he can marry anyone he likes as long as it's someone who can hunt alongside us," said Rys.

"What?!" said Uliminas. "Hold on a meowment, Rys. Isn't that kinda a high bar? Even I struggle to keep up with mew on meowr hunts..."

"Oh? You do?" asked Rys. "But Wyne has no trouble..."

"Rys!" Uliminas shouted, her eyes going wide. "Wyne is a dragon! She's a regular killing meowchine! If you base meowr expectations around her, Garyl will *never* find a bride!"

"Oh, but like, wasn't there a boy who liked Wyne?" asked Byleri. "You know...the kid from Calgosi Coast. Was his name Loplantz?"

"No," said Rys. "I forbid it."

"What?! Rys, why?!" Uliminas demanded.

"Well, it's true that he's an honest and good child. But Wyne needs someone strong enough to stop her when she's acting foolish. I can't imagine it working out."

"Ahh..." Uliminas nodded. "I suppose that makes sense... Wyne does everything at full power, after meowll..."

"Well, it's up to us to protect these adorable children," said Rys.

“Yeah,” agreed Uliminas. “I gotta do my best too...”

“Me too,” said Balirossa. “I’ll do everything I can.”

“Like, totally,” said Byleri. “I’ll do my best raising the kids... But I kinda wish Lord Sleip would spend more time doting on *me*, y’know?”

“Oh, I get it,” said Uliminas. “It’s been furever since we’ve had time, with the kids and everything. Although Balirossa’s been sneaking off alone with Ghozal, mew know...”

“What?!” Balirossa exclaimed. “H-How did you find out?”

“Ah ha ha!” Uliminas laughed. “Did mew really think Ghozal could keep that a secret?”

“N-Now that you mention it, I suppose not...”

“Come to think of it, it’s been some time for me too...” said Rys.

As the occupants of the women’s bath carried on their lively conversation, the three fathers—Flio, Ghozal, and Sleip—were also together in the men’s bath.

“Um...” said Flio. “Talking about the kids is one thing, but...”

“Yeah, I know...” said Ghozal. “I get so embarrassed when people talk about what they do in bed. And I have twice as many wives, so it’s twice as embarrassing...”

“Well, I’m terribly sorry, you two!” said Sleip in a loud cheerful voice. “But at my age, well...it hardly seems to matter at all!”

Flio and Ghozal glanced at Sleip, almost impressed by his cavalier attitude.

The men kept chatting for some time. It was a while before either group got out of the bath.

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading this book. Somehow, *Level 2 Cheat* was able to make it all the way to volume seven! When Overlap Novels agreed to help me publish this series, I never in my wildest dreams imagined that it would continue on for so many volumes. I owe it all to everyone who's given me their kind support. Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

After the sixth volume, they brought in Comic Gardo to do the manga adaptation. Personally, as a manga reader myself, I'm looking forward to seeing what they do with it.

The plot of this book ended up quite different from the web novel version, but I did include the popular *Hello Darkness, My Old Friend* subplot from the web novel, with a few changes and revisions. Flio's house has more children than ever, making things ever more chill. I hope you enjoyed reading it.

Finally, I would like to again thank Katagiri for the wonderful illustrations, and everyone at Overlap for their work on the publishing side of things. And, of course, thank you again for reading this book.

Miya Kinojo, January 2019



Chillin' in Another World
WITH LV 2 SUPER CHEAT POWERS

Story by Miya Kinojo
Illustrations by Katagiri

7



Name Folmina 8

Name Rislei 8

Name Wyne 8

Name Elinàsze 8

Name Rys 8

The daughters of the house, at night



“I’m gonna
stuff myself
until I
burst!”

“Oh
noooo...”

Name | Hero Gold-Hair | 8

Name | Tsuya | 8

Name | Valentine | 8

Bonus Short Stories

Flio's Home From Work!

◇Houghtow City—Flio's House◇

The evening sun shone down on Flio's house when a magic circle suddenly appeared in front of the main entrance. A teleportation portal emerged—a solitary door. Without missing a beat, it swung open.

Flio sighed as he stepped out. He had spent the day teleporting all over the Magical Kingdom of Klyrode, doing sales talks with people in various cities. Some of the distances he had traveled would take months by carriage. Flio was the only human in the world who could teleport that far so many times in one day. When he reached Level 2, he had obtained immense magical power. But Flio had no awareness of how strong he really was. Instead, he had deluded himself into thinking that the feats he could accomplish were normal for magic users in this world.

"I guess that does it for work," he said. "Time to head home." He stretched and then headed for the front door when he heard Wyne's voice from overhead.

"Yaaay, dada! It's dada!" She was descending fast, dragon wings on her back and a big grin on her face. Her wings closed up as she went into a dive, straight for Flio.

Wyne was still a child, but she was nevertheless the mightiest dragonewt soldier alive. Her charge was enough to level mountains. But Flio immediately began casting spell after spell—Absorb Impact, Wall of Iron, Immunity... Each was advanced magic requiring a long casting time, but Flio cast them without any incantation whatsoever. He caught her, holding her in his arms.

"Dada! Welcome home! Welcome home!"

"It's good to see you, Wyne," Flio said. "Have you been a good girl?"

Wyne beamed, rubbing her cheeks against Flio's. "Yeah! I've been a good girl all day!"

Still holding Wyne in his arms, Flio went inside.

"Gwower!" This time it was Sybe who went to pounce on him when it noticed him coming through the door. Sybe wasn't nearly as powerful as Wyne, but as a psychobear, it boasted tremendous destructive might, even when it was only playing.

The scenario played exactly like it had with Wyne. Flio immediately began casting spell after spell...and you can imagine the rest.

"I'm home, Sybe! Ah ha ha! Sybe! That tickles!" Flio grinned and laughed as the psychobear licked his face.

"Hey!" said Wyne. "No fair, Sy-Sy! I wanna lick dada's face too!" Determined not to lose to Sybe, Wyne began licking Flio's face as well.

"W-Wyne!" said Flio, a perturbed expression crossing his face. "That's enough!"

"Oh! Papa!"

"Dad! Welcome home!"

Drawn by the commotion in the entryway, Elinàsze and Garyl ran downstairs and came up to their father.

"Hello, Elinàsze! Hello, Garyl! I'm home!"

"Welcome home, papa," said Elinàsze, a bright smile on her face. "I hope your work went well?"

"Good job at work, dad!" said Garyl. "Hey, guess what happened at school!"

"Not now, Garyl!" Elinàsze scolded her brother. "Papa is tired from work! We should let him rest first."

"Fine, fine. I'll let him rest a bit."

Flio watched the twins argue with his usual easygoing smile. And then, Rys appeared.

"Welcome home, my lord husband," she said. "Dinner will be ready soon."

Why don't you relax until then?"

"Thank you, Rys!" said Flio, smiling at his wife. "Now, to the living room..."

Rys went to give Flio a hug, but with Wyne and Sybe already clinging to him and Elinàsze and Garyl crowding around, she was unable to get close. Flio gave her a wry smile. He asked Sybe to step back a bit and beckoned Rys to him with his now-empty right hand. Grinning, Rys jumped into his arms.

It wasn't as deadly a charge as Wyne's, or even Sybe's, but it was still a rather forceful tackle. So Flio began casting spell after spell...et cetera.

"Welcome home, my lord husband!"

"I'm home, Rys!"

The two embraced, smiling happily. Before long, the rest of the family had gathered as well. It looked like it was going to be a typical evening at Flio's house.

Rys's Kitchen

There were many people living at Flio's house other than Flio and his family, and the one who prepared dinner for all of them was Flio's wife, Rys. Lately, Byleri, the former archer and current manager of the pastures, had been pitching in with cooking...

"Hah!" Rys swung the knife in her hand with tremendous fervor. It diced through vegetables up and down, left and right, faster than the eye could follow.

Byleri's eyes opened wide in shock. "Whaaa!" she exclaimed. "I-I, like, totally couldn't see the knife move!" Before her eyes, Rys was peeling, dicing, and chopping vegetables with lightning speed and dividing them into bowls. She moved in a fluid, unbroken flow. Byleri merely stared, her mouth agape, unable to keep up as Rys dashed around the kitchen.

"S-So, like, Lady Rys, how long did it take you to get this good at cooking?" Byleri asked.

"I began cooking shortly after my lord husband and I married," Rys replied.

“Wha?! R-Really?!”

“Really! Up until then, I mostly ate with my subordinates. One of them was always on cooking duty. I had never cooked, myself.”

“W-Wow... That’s, like, something else!” Byleri was in awe. She watched Rys work, the knife in her hand not stopping for a single second.

“The first time I tried, all I could do was sear a hunk of unseasoned meat for my lord husband. I knew that would never do, so I enrolled in a cooking class in the city and studied as hard as I could. And now, I can use a chef’s knife to do *this*—!” She kept on cutting, faster than the eye could see.

Byleri gulped. *I-I dunno... she thought. I think Lady Rys might be, like, the only person in the world who can use a knife like that...*

“Um... Umm...” Byleri started. “I-I guess I’ll, like, take this and mix up the salad, then?”

“Yes, thank you, Byleri.”

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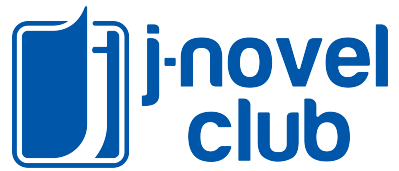
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Chillin' in Another World with Level 2 Super Cheat Powers: Volume 7

by Miya Kinojo

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by OVERLAP, Inc.

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Ebook edition 1.0: October 2022

Premium E-Book